

Natural Habitat.

Adam William John Baker.

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University, 2007.

DECLARATION:

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Adam William John Baker

ABSTRACT:

The research herein relates to the development and ideology behind the creative piece *Natural Habitat*, and is concerned with exploring effective narrative techniques. The goal of this research is to provide a methodology towards creating effective narrative in the medium of hypertext by developing a better understanding of how narrative functions.

The research explores the social and cognitive elements of narrative, and the manner in which structure impacts the understanding and development of narrative. The genre boundaries of medium and content are explored to gain an understanding of reader preference and expectation. The concept of reader expectation is then applied to multiform narrative in order to understand its functionality, before the question of effective combination of these elements is raised in regards to the medium of hypertext. This methodology is then implemented in the piece *Natural Habitat*, testing the merit of this approach in the resulting work of fiction.

Natural Habitat is a story describing the journey four friends make through the Amazon jungle after surviving a plane crash. Isolated and in a hostile environment, the four survivors find themselves slipping into surreal worlds that seem futuristic, fantastic, horrific, and tinged with noir. Some begin to question their sanity, while others adapt to their environs readily, but each faces their darker side as the fears in their minds begin to play out on the landscape around them. Fighting to survive, their only chance is to find each other and to conquer their inner demons.

The story is both the exploration and implementation of the arguments of the thesis, with the research guiding the construction of the story from planning, through initial writings and up to the final presentation. *Natural Habitat* itself is presented as a traditional novel and a piece of hypertext, facilitating comparative analysis between the two mediums.

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INTRODUCTION:

Natural Habitat is an attempt to revise the format of the modern novel to better utilise contemporary technology and reading habits. This thesis will argue that readers have become accustomed to segmented text, episodic storylines and have evolved critical and analytical skills capable of piecing together fragments of narrative to create a whole. Our daily lives are evolving to focus on the computer screen, the newspaper article, the text message and the email; these forms of segmented text are ubiquitous today. Furthermore, this conditioning is reinforced by the episodic nature of television and film programming, where a super-saturation of this nature of storytelling has driven the demand for easily digestible segments of information increasingly over the last two decades.

Serialised soap operas such as *The Bold and the Beautiful*¹ suggest that segmented narrative reaches a wide audience on a regular basis. This audience is not limited to adults either, as the evolution of cartoon episodes and anime seen in *Naruto*², *Dragonball*³, and *Beast Wars: Transformers*⁴ to contain causality and continuity demonstrates. This trend can also be observed in the popularity of sequels in movie fiction such as in *The Lord of the Rings*^{5 6 7}, *Star Wars*^{8 9 10} and

¹ *The Bold and the Beautiful*. Dir. Deveney Marking Kelly. Perf. Maeve Quinlan, Katherine Kelly Lang, Ronn Moss. Bell Phillip Television Productions Inc. 1987.

² *Naruto*. Dir. Hayato Date, Jeff Nimoy. Perf. Maile Flanagan, Yuri Lowenthal, Kate Higgins, Tara Platt. Cartoon Network, 2002.

³ *Dragonball*. Dir. Daisuke Nishio. Perf. Christopher Sabat, Stephany Nadolny, Tiffany Vollmer. FUNimation Entertainment, 1986.

⁴ *Beast Wars: Transformers*. Dir. Steve Ball. Perf. David Kaye, Scott McNeil, Gary Chalk. Mainframe Entertainment, 1996.

⁵ *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen. New Line Cinema, 2001 (motion picture).

⁶ *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen. New Line Cinema, 2002 (motion picture).

⁷ *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. Dir. Peter Jackson. Perf. Elijah Wood, Sean Astin, Viggo Mortensen, Ian McKellen. New Line Cinema, 2003 (motion picture).

Back to the Future^{11 12 13}. These works are examples of the visible and observable movements towards segmenting and serialising modern media for audiences of all mediums.

Natural Habitat stands as a response to this, and is intended to highlight the manner in which the ‘modern’ novel can be contemporised to better entertain the evolving reader. This thesis develops a methodology for constructing a creative work that draws on these historically disparate elements, by examining the development of narrative storytelling in film, television, short stories and hypertext. The methodology developed in this thesis is then used to produce the creative work; a novel that functions as both a traditional novel and as a hypertext piece. Key to this structure is the understanding that simplicity of design does not mean simplicity of concept, and that readers have become better educated in understanding complex narrative. Rather than weakening the narrative storytelling by adopting a more contemporary episodic or segmented structure, *Natural Habitat* relies upon the well-established codes of interpretation present in popular fiction in order to create a work that is both complex and user-friendly.

With the increasing viability of rapid transfer broadband connections, both here in Australia and abroad, the medium of hypertext is potentially ripe for a

⁸ *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. Dir. George Lucas. Perf. Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher. Lucasfilm Ltd, 1977 (motion picture).

⁹ *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*. Dir. Irvin Kershner. Perf. Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher. Lucasfilm Ltd, 1980 (motion picture).

¹⁰ *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*. Dir. Richard Marquand. Perf. Harrison Ford, Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher. Lucasfilm Ltd, 1983 (motion picture).

¹¹ *Back to the Future*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1985 (motion picture).

¹² *Back to the Future Part II*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1989 (motion picture).

¹³ *Back to the Future Part III*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1990 (motion picture).

revitalising renaissance. While early hypertext was limited by the nature of internet speeds, and challenged by the divergent nature of browsing technology across various computer systems, today's environment appears to have overcome many of these difficulties. Redeveloping media to function online, and catering to the particular needs of the audience are no longer the substantial barriers to hypertext as a medium that they¹⁴ once were. As these changes have moved slowly, so too has the trend towards bringing fiction back into an online medium, but there is a timely relevance in updating the old approaches to hypertext toward a goal of meeting the new demands of the audience that *Natural Habitat* has been designed to meet.

Genre fiction has become a staple of everyday life, and readers have over the course of their lives developed an intimate understanding of the rules and expectations of these genres, as this thesis explores in further detail. This thesis will argue that popular fiction is indeed so popular because for the majority of readers, interpretation of the narrative does not require learning new structures so much as building upon existing ones. Engagement with narrative occurs when the reader can recognise existing patterns within the text and map an interpretive process on to the story; the joy of the text comes from the various successes and failures of the story to meet these expectations. The exegesis undertaken here demonstrates the manner in which narrative dominates our lives and our thought structures, and highlights the fundamental ideologies in our culture that allow such a system to function.

¹⁴ Please note, "they" in this exegesis is often used to describe a singular individual with non-gendered bias. This is common throughout the piece, and is a conscious choice when discussing non-gendered but single individuals. "Singular they" is a common way of resolving in-text issues relating to gendered pronouns, and is my personal preferred preference in my writing.

Although working with popular genres implies a level of conformity, *Natural Habitat* stands as more than a hybrid of genres and character arcs; the narrative is structured around a meta-narrative guiding four distinct storylines. Exploring the idea of multiform narrative within a fictional work, the story has been designed to contain paradoxical information that requires the reader to apply different interpretive processes to the narrative in order to derive meaning. Rather than forcing a “choose your own adventure”¹⁵ style approach, the structure of *Natural Habitat* guides the reader to see a larger narrative. When they are provided with multiple perspectives on specific events in the text, the readers are asked to re-interpret the story. While the story remains functional if the reader uses the expected genre conventions, by acknowledging that two or more perspectives are in fact providing conflicting views of the same events, the reader can re-contextualise the story within an implied realist narrative stream associated with the piece. Encouraging this process, the manner in which the characters are transported to their genre-related setting remains paradoxical; the reader can then engage with the story as being literal or metaphorical in nature.

Natural Habitat is a work of fiction designed to entice the reader, to engage them on familiar ground while at the same time introducing them to new techniques. Based on four popular literature genres, the reader is encouraged to either selectively ‘adopt’ a character’s narrative, or to attempt to read the work as a whole, with its various perspectives, and uncover the meta-narrative driving the

¹⁵ This process functions similar to a tree structured narrative, where if/then style decisions and narrative writing create a complicated hierarchy of narrative ranging from “worst” to “best” style endings. This is produced functionally by having the reader turn to sections of labelled text or particular pages referenced in their choices, and acts in a manner similar to a hyperlink.

work. The layout encourages piecemeal reading, and is presented as both a traditional novel that follows the broad requirements of structure and narrative development in an unconventional fashion, as well as a hypertext work that maintains a strong sense of linear continuity. The two mediums lend different strengths to the narrative, with a bias towards the novel being to consume the work in a linear fashion, while the hypertext form encourages a more holistic approach to reading, emphasising the interconnected nature of the material.

The narrative is structured around the idea that the readers will create a strong preference amongst one or more particular genres or characters, and rather than accept an all or nothing position, attempt to engage their interest in as focused a way as possible. *Natural Habitat* as a whole may not appeal to every reader, but every attempt has been made to create a work that can be engaging to people interested in one of the four genres used. Simultaneously, *Natural Habitat* provides a considered methodology for creating similar works, and presents an approach to fiction writing that is relevant to the changing environment of creative writing. The end result is a creative work that can be as simple as the reader desires it to be, on one hand standing as four separate streams of narrative that can be read and enjoyed separately, and on the other as a complex work designed to raise more questions than it answers, challenging the reader to seek those answers, all while demonstrating a functional methodology that can be applied to create new works in a similar style.

This thesis begins by tackling the question of what narrative means, and raises the complexities of narrative function in Chapter 1 - Narrative. Considering

the psychological impact narrative has on the reader, and the manner in which narrative is interpreted by the reader, this thesis discusses the idea of catharsis. The cathartic nature of narrative provides an outlet for the author of a work by discussing “narrative psychology”¹⁶, and this chapter argues that simultaneously there is a culture-reinforcing element to narrative function in society. The chapter then moves on to define the symbiotic relationship of narrative and culture, and the mirrored relationship between reader and author, before highlighting the history of narrative. The discussion then moves on to what can be deemed effective narrative, before introducing the narrative of *Natural Habitat* in more depth, and demonstrating the ways in which it seeks to emulate effective narrative.

Chapter 2 – Structure outlines the concepts and implications behind adopting a structural approach to narrative and communication. The importance of structure in narrative interpretation and analysis is demonstrated, as the discussion values the impact of visible and interpretable structures on narrative effectiveness. By utilising the work of John Holloway¹⁷ and other authors, the theoretical implications of structure are given a practical framework for their use in producing narrative. The history of structuralism is discussed, before moving on to the practical implications of employing a structural approach to narrative writing from the perspective of the author. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate the manner in which structure can both guide an author to develop

¹⁶ Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. 1986, New York: Praeger .

¹⁷ Holloway, J., *Narrative and structure : exploratory essays*. 1979, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P 2.

effective narrative, while at the same time facilitate the engagement of expectation-aware readers in becoming involved with the reading of narrative.

Chapter 3 – Genre focuses on the function and usage of genre in contemporary society. This chapter argues that genre is prevalent and intrinsic to the operation of narrative, and examines the roles of genre in guiding form and content towards an expectant audience. The role of genre in building narrative expectations is discussed, drawing the arguments of Chapter 1 - Narrative into sharper focus as the cyclical and symbiotic nature of narrative and culture is expanded upon to include the concept of reader expectation, and the role that thwarting those expectations can play on narrative engagement. The specifics of genre are established, both genres of form and content, and the interconnected nature of specific genres as discussed by Todorov¹⁸ are developed. An analysis is undertaken of the strengths and weaknesses of Propp¹⁹'s approach to folktales, with the goal being to produce relevant insight regarding the unique nature of genre fiction. The rules that govern genres relevant to *Natural Habitat* are questioned critically, in an effort to demonstrate how genre awareness can aid an author in conveying their message effectively.

Chapter 4 – Multiform Narrative seeks to further expand the ideas regarding narrative established in this thesis by introducing the function of paradoxical works to this equation. Multiform narrative as a concept is developed

¹⁸ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

¹⁹ Propp, V., *Morphology of the folk tale* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press.

critically, taking off from the writings of Janet Murray²⁰ and building up to expanding these writings into a practical application. The advantages and disadvantages of such an intense reading experience are commented on in regards to reading and writing effective narrative. Further discussion regarding reader expectation is introduced, as is the idea that reader expectation and paradoxical narrative can function to produce a desire in the reader to complete their own narrative from the elements they have perceived in a text. This is shown to be governed by the expectations of genre and structure, and serves to allow the reader to interpret multiple paradoxical events to best meet their own desired expectations of narrative.

Chapter 5 – Hypertext, art and writing serves the dual role of providing critical commentary on the medium of hypertext, while at the same time offering reflective analysis of the writing process in general, and in particular the creative requirements of working in the medium of hypertext. The discussion in this chapter begins with the history of hypertext before moving on to delineate the movements that have brought contemporary hypertext writing to where it is today. The work of Douglas²¹ is used to examine the fundamental differences of hypertext to other mediums, before discussing the different approaches an author can take to best utilise these differences. The ubiquitous nature of segmented text and online narrative is raised, before placing *Natural Habitat* into such a context and deciding how it can best meet the goals of engaging readers familiar with this form of communication. This chapter closes with personal writings offering

²⁰ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

²¹ Douglas, J.Y., "Maps, Gaps, and Perceptions: What Hypertext Readers (Don't) Do," from *Perforations* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1992). (n.p.). P 13.

insight into the production of and inspiration behind *Natural Habitat*, with the hope that these writings in combination with the theoretical groundwork laid out throughout this thesis can guide further writings in this area.

The conclusion to this thesis summarises the arguments and discussions brought forward throughout this work, and seeks to definitively establish the connections between narrative, structure, genre, multiform works and hypertext as related and crucial elements in creating effective narrative in the hypertext medium and facilitating the process of interpretation in the reader. The demonstration of these arguments lies in the creative work *Natural Habitat*, and it is here that the praxis of implementing these techniques can be best shown.

CHAPTER 1: NARRATIVE

What is narrative?

In order to discuss the approach taken in writing this thesis, it is essential to first define the terminology that is being used. This is not a simple task, as the concepts of narrative and genre are broad and have evolved over time, including new theoretical approaches and forms as they have developed. Without a definitive meaning to rely on, it is necessary to discuss narrative, and establish the boundaries of its usage throughout this thesis.

There is a problem in defining narrative, which stems from the plurality of the word. Much as measurement refers to the act of measuring, the end result of a measurement, and the tool used to make the measurement, narrative acts as both a noun and an adjective in English. As such, narrative derives its sense from context. In the broadest terms, narrative refers to a sequence of information that is produced by what this thesis terms to be a ‘progenitor’.²² Regardless of whether the narrative is received, it contains an implied narrator who is telling the sequence of information in some fashion to the implied narratee, or in the terms of this thesis, the ‘interpreter’²³. The role of these implicitly present figures is to understand the narrative. They do so by first re-contextualising the narrative based

²² A progenitor being an originator of information, but not automatically the creator of information. Often narrative is retold rather than told, and this thesis is exploring the function of the telling, and uses this term to distinguish the original source from the most recent source, much as the author of a work is not necessarily its only narrator.

²³ This is taken from the classical meaning of reader, but removes the implied genre specific nature of reading the term has taken on in contemporary language and restores the function to its classic sense.

on the cues given by the progenitor, and secondly use this information to interpret the narrative and garner meaning.

This function is where the narrative is re-constructed mentally, as the interpreter processes the information provided by the progenitor, and places it in a context that is relevant personally, thus recreating the narrative in a new context. Put in another way, the interpreter breaks the narrative down into its component pieces, and reconstructs a new understanding based on their own experience and desires. This process is most obvious when a non-linear narrative is related, as the first thing that occurs is the narrative is re-contextualised linearly to understand the implications of the act²⁴. Hence to read narrative, there is a need to create narrative, as this thesis will further argue.

Here, we are exploring the function of narrative storytelling, and the need to understand the concept of narrative and the manner in which narrative functions in society. The terms of this discussion are explored and defined here, and are relevant to all arguments made throughout this thesis. The progenitor of the narrative is most commonly referred to as its creator in general vernacular, but such a term does not include the function of retelling narrative and as such is ill-suited to the discussion in this thesis. This term can change across mediums to be replaced with other terms such as author, composer, writer and director, or perhaps to include multiple terms to refer to different stages of the

²⁴ “My sister hit me... but I guess it was sorta my fault for accidentally biting her,” becomes “I bit my sister and she hit me” as a direct and objective cause and effect relationship is attached to the narrative. The needs of the progenitor to understate the cause and emphasise the effect are then undone to create a new, similar meaning in the eyes of the interpreter.

authorship/narrative construction process²⁵. As the focus of this thesis is on the direct communicative contact made between an author and their direct reader, or such events as a viewer directly watching an unedited/mediated film/TV show, the progenitor of the work is specifically identifying the source of the work most immediate to the interpreter, and vice versa.

The interpreter of the narrative is most often called a reader in general parlance, but can equally be the viewer or listener, depending upon the medium being discussed. Interpreter in this thesis is not used in a medium specific fashion, but rather in the broader senses of reader, “One who reads or peruses”²⁶ and “An expounder, interpreter”.²⁷ The interpreter of a narrative can also be referred to by the primary sensory input required to interpret the narrative, such as a listener of music, a viewer of television and film.²⁸ In common usage, the term narrative refers to a story told through communications mediums such as film, radio and literature, yet the term is much broader, including speech and body language, historical narratives and even the logical mental constructions that language-speaking humans use without necessarily having an awareness of the process. “From the time we begin to understand language until our death, we are perpetually surrounded by narratives, first of all in our family, then at school, then through our encounters with people and reading.”²⁹

²⁵ While we often discuss narrative as having a single author, this is rarely the case regardless of medium, and often narrative is retold through a chain of communication, or undergoes revision by multiple people, each adding their voice to the work and its meaning.

²⁶ OED.

²⁷ OED.

²⁸ This also holds true for tasters of fine wines, where a historical narrative is recreated in order to appreciate the wine in question.

²⁹ Ruthrof, H., *The reader's construction of narrative*. 1981, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. P 34.

Within the scope of this thesis, the term ‘narrative’ is used to refer to the act of storytelling, and the term ‘narrative text’ refers to narratives told by an author to a reader through the forms of narrative fiction, and specifically through the use of short stories, novels, and hypertext. Narrative as it is used here is not medium specific, whereas narrative text is. It is assumed the narratives that are discussed are intended to convey meaning, while acknowledging at the same time the interpretation made by a reader can only be the subject of speculation. These limitations to the concept of narrative are essential; without establishing what constitutes narrative there cannot be a valid comparison to other modes and forms of communication. The method of comparing narratives texts in this thesis will be developed from an amalgam of literary and narratology theories, and will be used primarily to create a methodology for interpreting narratives that are traditionally seen as disparate; the arguments made herein rely on comparing narrative texts from different forms and subjects.

The commentary on narrative and narrative text in this discussion is often in reference to the work *Natural Habitat*, written as both an example of and in response to the theoretical approaches outlined herein. *Natural Habitat* exists as both a traditional novel and as a work presented in the medium of hypertext. One of the goals of this thesis is to examine the similarities and differences that occur across these two mediums specifically, and across other modern mediums in broad terms. It is intended that *Natural Habitat* is read before this thesis is read critically, although the arguments made do not rely on *Natural Habitat* as their sole example.

What is the importance of narrative?

Ruthrof³⁰ suggests that there is a saturation of narrative within our lives, yet the importance of this remains to be further explored in the current thesis. While there is no definitive conclusion regarding why narrative exists, or the purpose it serves, there are several points that need to be raised. One idea that has been established is that narrative exists as a logical and communicative universal language, “Myths were stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others. But it was Aristotle who first developed this insight into a philosophical position when he argued, in his *Poetics*, that the art of storytelling (...) is what gives us a *shareable world*.”³¹ In practice then, when we use narrative to communicate we are representing concepts and thoughts in terms that another can understand, and it is the context of these thoughts that changes when interpreted within the mind of the reading individual. However, this does not explain why we continually create narrative, nor the impact that narrative can have on how ideas are expressed and communicated.

One of the drives to create narrative may stem from the effect of narrative on its progenitor. “Aristotle’s answer, again in the *Poetics*, was that narrative – for example, tragic drama, one form of narration dominant in the Greece of Aristotle’s time – plays a fundamental social and psychological role. Plays effect what he called, using a medical term, *catharsis* of the undesirable emotions of pity

³⁰ Ruthrof, H., *The reader's construction of narrative*. 1981, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. P 34.

³¹ Kearney, R., *On stories*. Thinking in action. 2002, London ; New York: Routledge. P 3.

and fear.”³² The idea that telling a narrative may evoke a sense of emotional stability or acceptance in the progenitor has of late been adopted into psychological techniques, with the introduction of narrative psychology. While not a distinct methodology of psychology, narrative psychology is an approach to the “storied nature of human conduct”³³, and explores the emotional impact that narrative can carry for both the progenitor and the interpreter. Furthermore, this effect of narrative storytelling can be seen in the desire for confession that often drives narrative texts, be they autobiographical, ficto-autobiographical, epistolary or anecdotal in nature.³⁴ “I have little doubt that we therapists have lost the chance to make some professional fees because a prospective patient achieved catharsis, insight into compassion for himself, through writing a poem, a novel, or a play. Disclosure of one’s being can be therapeutic.”³⁵ This raises the point, if to read is to re-construct a new narrative, this must also provide a form of catharsis for the reader.

What is interesting here is that the interpretation made by the reader does not necessarily allow them to feel the *same* catharsis. While narrative psychology suggests that groups retelling traumatic events may feel comforted by this process, the same cannot be always assumed for all who may interpret such a narrative. Indeed, it may be that while readers may receive a release of guilt and their unique forms of catharsis³⁶, other readers may become traumatised or be left unsettled by

³² Miller, Hillis J., “Narrative” in Lentricchia, F. and T. McLaughlin, *Critical terms for literary study*.

2nd ed. 1995, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P 67.

³³ Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. 1986, New York: Praeger .

³⁴ Sarbin, T. R. (Ed.). *Narrative psychology: The storied nature of human conduct*. 1986, New York: Praeger .

³⁵ Jourard, S.M. *The transparent self*. 1971, Van Nostrand Reinhold. P 60.

³⁶ Brand, A.G. *Therapy in Writing*. 1980, Heath, Massachusetts : Lexington Books.

the same process. This begs the question; why would readers be interested in perpetuating a process that might result in discomfort? A philosopher interested in the power of narrative and identity, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, argues that narratives can be used by groups of minority voices to create a “counterstory”³⁷, a reinvention of the identity of the group by challenging the “master narratives”³⁸ or meta-narratives of a society. While narrative can have a positive influence on identity, or provide the progenitor cathartic release, this effect stems from the emotional context that the progenitor is speaking from, and as such it cannot be assumed that the only drive for narrative is catharsis; not all narrative can claim to provide a strong emotional release for the progenitor. This process of seeking catharsis is further developed in Chapter 3 – Genre and Chapter 4 – Multiform Narrative, and is key to understanding the drives behind narrative function.

Focusing on the idea of narrative reinforcing and challenging identity, it can then be said that narrative may fulfil another function; narrative acts to establish and reinforce culture. “*Why do we need the ‘same’ story over and over?*” The answer to this question is more related to the affirmative, culture-making function of narrative than to its critical or subversive function.”³⁹ Much as modelled or observed behaviours influence an individual’s behaviours, narratives that are published in the public domain become models for culture. Whenever a narrative models a situation, conversation, rule, behaviour, or any other aspect of society the narrative is presenting the model to the reader through its own narrative logic. All narrative requires an internal logic, and it is this logic,

³⁷ Nelson, H.L., *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. 2001, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. P 6.

³⁸ Nelson, H.L., *Damaged identities, narrative repair*. 2001, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. P 6.

³⁹ Miller, Hillis J., “Narrative” in Lentricchia, F. and T. McLaughlin, *Critical terms for literary study*. 2nd ed. 1995, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P 70.

communicated to the experienced reader by genre, that delineates the boundaries and expectations within the narrative domain.

Natural Habitat relies on several distinct forms of narrative logic, which is a result of the multiple genres that the story engages. Generic texts often have elaborate implied rules or an established body of work that influences what is deemed acceptable in terms of narrative logic to the reader. *Natural Habitat* draws on the genres of science fiction, fantasy, detective fiction and horror fiction to tell its story, and in doing so attempts to maintain a believable and acceptable level of suspension of disbelief across these four genres. Events that are considered acceptable or that fit into the inner logic of a traditional science fiction world are not necessarily acceptable to a fantasy genre, just as events that are typical to horror fiction are often atypical to fantasy. The narrative logic of *Natural Habitat* relies on something of a granulated approach; multiple layers of logic structure the text. There is a broad logic in the story that governs the predictability of characters across the work, as well as the interaction of characters with each other and their expectations. Conversely, there are genre-specific logics governing the use of elements distinct to generic fiction, such as supernatural themes in horror and fantasy, technical and scientific discussions that are related to detective fiction and science fiction. These genre-elements remain isolated in their own genre-specific logic, but still interact with the overall story logic to create believable worlds, characters and events.

When engaging with narrative, it is the interpreter that is required to accept the narrative logic presented in the text. In order to maintain the credibility of the

narrative, the progenitor can be expected to provide a system of logic that will appear realistic when compared to the real world society. Furthermore, there exists a cyclical or symbiotic relationship between narrative and society. The reflection of culture and society in narrative is influenced by the existing culture and society, just as ideals in culture and society are reinforced by how they are represented in narrative. This is a simplification of how narrative and culture serve to reinforce each other however, because the system described here does not allow for the reaction of the progenitor and the interpreter in this process. There is no consideration of the parallel relationship of the progenitor-interpreter relationship to the narrative-society function, as this thesis will now explore. Chapter 3 – Genre goes on to further the discussion of the progenitor-interpreter/narrative-society relationship by analysing the needs of the interpreter regarding narrative expectation, and where these needs are formed.

Rather than an idealised, self-reinforcing system working in perfect harmony and leading to a stagnant and sedentary society, we find a social system that is constantly changing to re-evaluate and challenge itself. This activity within the symbiotic system of culture and narrative occurs for numerous reasons. Firstly, we cannot assume that a situation of *ceteris paribus*⁴⁰ exists, and must acknowledge that a multitude of outside factors can impact this symbiosis⁴¹. Secondly, narrative does not exclusively determine culture, just as culture does not categorically dictate narrative. Environment changes, physiology, health epidemics and fundamental changes in the spiritual and scientific understanding

⁴⁰ *Ceteris Paribus* means “All things being equal”. Wordnet. 1997. *Dictionary.com/Ceteris Paribus*. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ceteris+paribus>>. (14 June 2004).

⁴¹ This list is vast, but things that provide a barrier to the flow of information or the expression of opinion such as costs of publishing and Government controls are good examples of external factors.

of the world have all had significant impacts on narrative and culture, just to name some examples. Finally, and it is this point that is most significant in regards to narrative, the narrative that portrays society is interpreted and re-contextualised in the reading process, and this is where the sequence of information can change.

Once more, the resistance/resilience of an interpreter to the message that a narrative conveys becomes important; regardless of how well a narrative serves to depict elements of society, there is no guarantee that an interpreter will interpret the progenitor's intended message, or agree with it. Here is where the narrative-society relationship is tied to the progenitor-interpreter one, in that the expectations of the interpreter do not exist in a void, and are instead guided and informed by the current society⁴². This system for culture and narrative serving to reinforce each other is cyclical however, so the situation arises where the progenitor of a narrative is required to interpret the model of culture. Based on a progenitor's resistance to the culture model, their acceptance of the social norms, a decision may be made to produce a narrative that is non-concordant; as a result of a progenitor's resistance, a counter-culture narrative may be introduced.⁴³ "Variations from the norm draw much of their meaning from the fact that they *are* derivations from the rules."⁴⁴ Therefore, culture becomes modelled on both

⁴² That is to say, re-interpretation is not an ungoverned and haphazard affair, the interpreter will apply keys and expectations that are guided by society as a whole, and as such are unlikely to substantially be divergent.

⁴³ An example of this act would be the rise of the anti-hero in comic culture throughout the 80s. As society began to question the motivations of typical heroes and indeed their value system, new heroes arose that broke away from the trend. With an influx of anti-heroes such as Spawn, and the Punisher, while existing characters such as Batman and Wolverine were given darker personalities and backgrounds, the anti-hero took precedence over classic heroes such as Superman and Captain America. This shift towards the anti-hero still drives the comic world today, in such storylines as "The Dark Knight Strikes Again" and "Civil War", going so far as to symbolically kill Captain America and corrupt the original Robin into his antithesis the insane Joker as comments on the fall of the righteous in contemporary society.

⁴⁴ Miller, Hillis J., "Narrative" in Lentricchia, F. and T. McLaughlin, *Critical terms for literary study*.

narrative cultures and counter-cultures, and these mutations/aberrations from the accepted norm ricochet cyclically within the culture/narrative system.⁴⁵

In combination, it can be demonstrated that narrative has a great deal of influence within society, acting as a reinforcer of culture, a mode of expressing concepts, and as a language base to communicate this information with. In addition, there are many social, political and economic drives for narrative; narrative serves as the evolving method of communicating concepts between individuals, while at the same time facilitating the presentation of an idea or concept to numerous interpreters. In explaining the function and importance of narrative it would be remiss to suggest that there are only positive uses for the functions of narrative; narrative has time and again been used (misused?) to enforce the ideas of a minority over a dissenting majority⁴⁶. The use or abuse of narrative stems from the intentions of the progenitor and the interpreter however, and not something inherent to narrative itself.

A history of narrative.

Exploring the evolution of literary narrative provides a historical basis for the concepts that are key to the creation of *Natural Habitat*. By identifying and understanding the development of key movements in literary writing, and the

2nd ed. 1995, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P 70.

⁴⁵ Or narrative and culture influence each other, but rather than this leading to an equilibrium, the potential for resistance to the narrative message leads to a simultaneous counter-culture, which then becomes part of the system.

⁴⁶ Controversial yet topical examples being the media sanitisation of the first Iraq war, the Great Firewall of China that is used to censor and redirect Chinese internet traffic, and the disinformation governing the War on Terror that led to the invasion of Iraq on tenuous information. These are factual occurrences, yet stand as examples of narrative being manipulated to great effect by a minority against a majority, as what are these acts of misinformation if not narrative?

manner in which they differ both from the movements that preceded and succeeded them, a pattern can be demonstrated. As each movement borrows heavily from the last, and techniques are carried throughout similar movements, the fundamental difference becomes one of philosophy rather than style. As romanticism moved into realism, the philosophy became one of the value of truth over beauty, just as moving to modernism becomes a demonstration of selective philosophy, a pro colonial skew of the authenticity of objective truth, which is later twisted into its antithesis but still utilising the same techniques as post-modernism came to the fore. This simplification, while not considering all movements in literature that could be discussed, still demonstrates the manner in which subsequent movements borrow the techniques of prior ones, but the differences in philosophy represent a cultural backlash to the preceding prevalent ideology.

While narrative is not inherently aligned to either the dark or light side of the force⁴⁷, it cannot be seen as an objective communicative tool; there is never an absolutely objective narrative, as there is never an absolutely objective progenitor or interpreter. History itself, as a form of narrative, is subject to this same basic argument. While the recording of history is not often seen as a polarised act, there is an understanding now that much of what a culture understands as history is in fact the grand narrative of history, or history as the progenitor would have it recorded. Examining the evolution of narrative studies historically, we choose to

⁴⁷ This phrase stands in place of “good and evil” to establish a dichotomy of opposing value systems, but without necessarily passing judgement as to which has more merit than the other. Both good and evil are loaded words in our culture, and to be an advocate for “evil” is a faux pas; However there are many people who admire Darth Vader and Darth Maul, just as many admire Han Solo and Obi Wan Kenobi, and neither side is “right” or “wrong”.

identify movements that can be measured in epochs, rather than accepting the gradually re-construed manner of (primarily academic) interpretation.

The influences of contemporary movements in narrative literature impact directly theorists that are concerned with those works. Observed significant shifts in attitudes towards narrative might then be attributed to the historical chroniclers preceding and ante-ceding these shifts. The manner in which narrative has been understood has changed continually in recent times; there has been much time and effort applied to the creation and understanding of narrative techniques, interpretation and construction. As a comprehensive and chronological grand narrative of narrative does not exist, it is instead productive for discussion to examine trends in understanding narrative that have evolved. By highlighting distinct approaches and arguments regarding the construction and interpretation of narrative, the intention is to explore different facets of narrative.

When attempting to educate school children about narrative texts and stories, the first words they will often hear are that a good story has a beginning, middle, and end. This sentiment may be influenced by Aristotle, “As to that poetic imitation which is narrative in form and employs a single meter, the plot manifestly ought, as in a tragedy, to be constructed on dramatic principles. It should have for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end.”⁴⁸, and indeed, “Children quickly become virtual Aristotelians, insisting upon any storyteller’s observation of the ‘rules’, upon

⁴⁸ Aristotle. S.H. Butcher. (Trans.). 350 B.C.E. *The internet classics archive – Poetics by Aristotle*. < <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.3.3.html>>. (14 June 2004).

proper beginnings, middles, and particularly ends.”⁴⁹ It is from this basic principle that much of our early understanding of narrative is developed. Here, the focus of the narrative is seen to be the plot, and the success of a narrative text in attracting the attention of the reader comes from the ability of the writer to construct a series of events that appear to be complete. This basic beginning-middle-end concept is then expanded to include the classical features of the form of narrative text being produced, such as an exposition, climax and a dénouement. The concept of flat and rounded characters is introduced, and writers are taught to create a character from speech, actions, appearance and observations. All of these elements are developed to allow the writer to build a strong plot, and to establish the limitations of the different forms of narrative texts. While this understanding of narrative may seem basic, this can often be the extent of teaching that we receive in our current primary and secondary education system, and should not be dismissed as an elementary approach; writing/reading for the plot stands as the method of choice most writers/readers will use in creating and interpreting narrative⁵⁰.

Instead of focusing on the act of writing and creating narrative, the majority of academic research into narrative has instead focused on the act of reading and interpreting narrative. Narratology has been a primary focus of philosophers and literary critics for many years, and there have been numerous schools of thought on valid methods of making useful assessments of narrative texts. Many of these schools of philosophical approach developed from earlier studies, and often the fundamental differences between these schools can be

⁴⁹ Brooks, P., *Reading for the plot : design and intention in narrative*. 1984, Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon P.
P 1.

⁵⁰ For an example of this very common approach in practice see chapter 1 in Burroway, J., *Writing Fiction: A guide to narrative craft*. 1987, Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company.

traced to political and cultural pressures of the time. This exegesis, and the resulting creative work of *Natural Habitat* are instead a praxis, a theory implemented in a practical fashion.

“The views of the Formalists and (some) structuralists resemble Aristotle’s in a striking way. They too argue that characters are products of plots, that their status is ‘functional’, that they are, in short, participants or *actants* rather than *personages*, that it is erroneous to consider them as real beings.⁵¹ Structuralism, an extension of the early 1900’s Russian formalism and built upon (amongst other influences) the structural linguistics studies of Saussure, focuses on the relationships of systems in forming meaning. Closely linked to functionalism, structuralism has been applied to many fields of academic study, including psychology, literature, economics and philosophy, although the interpretation of the term changes in each field. Perhaps the signature of Saussure’s work was the separation of the sign into the signifier and the signified⁵². Structuralists examine the method of interpreting meaning from the system of language, and when this principle is applied to literary studies, or any other field, it is used to study the manner in which convention and established modes of communication are built upon to interpret meaning. The primary orders of meaning are seen to stem from binary opposites, and it is through these binary opposites that conventions of reading and writing are constructed that allow progenitors and interpreters to communicate effectively in a cultural space. While an understanding of the system of communication has value to those studying it, the temporality of structuralism

⁵¹ Chatman, S., *Story and discourse : narrative structure in fiction and film*. 1978, Ithaca: Cornell U.P.

P 111.

⁵² Saussure, F.D. and C. Bally, *Course in general linguistics*. Rev. ed. 1974: Fontana.

means that in reality it is less useful for a progenitor in producing a text than it is for an interpreter understanding a text.

Against this, there is the realist movement that occurred in a similar timeframe, exemplified in the works of Honoré de Balzac⁵³, George Eliot⁵⁴, and Gustave Flaubert⁵⁵. Works of realism present the subject of the narrative in a natural, realistic manner, and are often focused very specifically on the middle class urban lifestyle. Realist texts present reality accurately from a specific point of view, and in detail rather than idyllically, in order to enhance the plausibility of the narrative. This includes portraying class distinctions and social norms of the time. Realism is focused on the importance of character, and often a realist text uses mundane plots and common situations in order to keep the focus of the reader on the evolution of the character in the piece. Language in realist texts is as objective as possible, without poetic phrases or advantaged perspectives, in order to create the illusion that the text is in fact representing reality, rather than a construction. The goal of realist works is to present the narrative of the present, representing the current mainstream culture in a historical mode. “As an artistic movement realism is the product and expression of the dominant mood of its time [the mid- to late 19th century]: a pervasive rationalist epistemology that turned its back on the fantasies of Romanticism and was shaped instead by the impact of the political and social changes as well as the scientific and industrial advances of its day.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Balzac, H., *La comédie humaine*. 1965 (reprint), Paris, France: Editions du Sueil.

⁵⁴ Eliot, G. *Middlemarch*. 1986 (reprint), Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.

⁵⁵ Flaubert, G., *Madame Bovary*. 1950 (reprint), n.p.: Modern Library.

⁵⁶ Furst, L. *Realism*. 1992, New York: Longman.

Magic realism, despite the apparent oxymoron, uses a similar approach to realist narrative texts, but adds the proviso that an element beyond the limitations of the real world can be added. Magic realism, a term which often overlaps works of science fiction and fantasy, tells narratives that are set within the restrictions of the real world and the representation of the modern culture, but then introduces an element of fantastical or futuristic storytelling. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Christine Brooke-Rose discusses many approaches to realism in science fiction, and explores the distinction between magic realist and science fiction texts, as well as the broad term of “Fabulation”⁵⁷ authored by Robert Scholes.⁵⁸ Many horror texts and films can be considered magic realism, but because of the usage of modern cultures and settings, this treatment of realism now falls within the boundaries of the horror genre itself. Realist representation has not had the same ties to the traditional science fiction and fantasy genres, but over time magic realist texts may be absorbed into the canon and guidelines of these genres, just as has occurred in the horror genre.

Working reflexively against many of the ideals of realism and structuralism comes modernism with a wide range of works including those by Joseph Conrad⁵⁹, Virginia Woolf⁶⁰, and James Joyce⁶¹. Despite the assumption that modernism is a clear-cut movement that occurred unilaterally amongst the arts, there are many different voices regarding the effects, implications and even the timing of this movement. Modernism within literature is primarily focused on

⁵⁷ Brooke-Rose, C., *A rhetoric of the unreal : studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic*. 1983, Cambridge ; Melbourne: Cambridge U.P. P 81.

⁵⁸ Brooke-Rose, C., *A rhetoric of the unreal : studies in narrative and structure, especially of the fantastic*. 1983, Cambridge ; Melbourne: Cambridge U.P. P 72- 102.

⁵⁹ Conrad, J., *Heart of Darkness*. 1989 (reprint), Harmondsworth: Penguin.

⁶⁰ Woolf, V. *Mrs Dalloway*. 1992 (reprint), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶¹ Joyce, J. *Ulysses*. 1969 (reprint), London: Bodley Head.

rejecting much of structuralism and realism, challenging the established distinctions of genre, perspective, closure and narrative progression. Modernist writing often presented poetic prose and other new combinations and explorations of form and structure, and as a movement modernism was responsible for introducing many unique storytelling techniques. No longer was the omnipotent third person narrator the prevalent choice. As the objective realism of this position was challenged, instead many texts used limited or multiple perspectives to create narratives. Disjointed and open-ended narratives were introduced, and it is within modernism that the idea of high and low forms of literature began to be challenged. Interestingly, many of these innovations to narrative still rely on the traditions of realism and structuralism, but reinvented for the sake of the artwork: Modernism as a movement was self-conscious and self-reflexive. Modernism is a rejection of the rational, and as a movement is summarised by the cry “*l’art pour l’art*”⁶², or “Art for art’s sake”⁶³.

Applying a post-modernist approach to “Art for art’s sake”, we then arrive at “*ars gratia artis*”⁶⁴, the Latin translation that appears within the MGM Studios logo over the roaring lion’s head. Where modernism challenged the ideals of realism and structuralism because of a belief in an existential crisis and a loss of identity to reason and rationality, post-modernism challenges these same ideals out of what can be fragmented into, “a postmodernism which seeks to deconstruct modernism and resist the status quo and a postmodernism of resistance and a

⁶² Credited to Theophile Gautier.

⁶³ Wikipedia. 9 Apr 2004. *Art for Art’s Sake*. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Art_for_art's_sake>. (14 June 2004).

⁶⁴ WorldHistory.com. *Metro Goldwyn Meyer*. <<http://www.worldhistory.com/wiki/M/Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.htm>>. (14 June 2004).

postmodernism of reaction.”⁶⁵ No longer is the identity of the individual at risk, but rather it is a thing that post-modernists can playfully and mockingly explore, as in MGM’s latin slogan. Many of the techniques remain the same between modernist and post-modernist writing, but it is in the extremity of these techniques that post-modernism often operates. Pastiche is one of the key elements of post-modern writing, and it is in the self aware usage of old styles and techniques that post-modernism attempts to convey meaning to a reader.⁶⁶ Often linked with the overlapping field of post-structuralism, post-modernism is a term that is often applied very broadly to works that arguably fall outside its ken, where works that predate modernism can be interpreted as post-modernist writings. Both modernism and post-modernism can be used as informative and rewarding approaches to creating and interpreting text, but given the flexibility of the terminology and the brevity⁶⁷ of academic history the question remains as to what impact these approaches have had on meaning and interpretation.

Each of these techniques and movements within the arts have merit in terms of the study of narrative and interpretation, but none of these methods are absolute and inviolate as an approach. “Aristotle and the Formalists and some structuralists subordinate character to plot, make it a function of plot, a necessary but derivative consequence of the chrono-logic of story. One could equally adopt an apposing position to Aristotle, and state that character is supreme and plot derivative, to justify the modernist narrative in which ‘nothing happens’.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Foster, H., *Postmodern culture*. 1985, London Sydney,: Pluto Press ;P xi-xii.

⁶⁶ Foster, H., *Postmodern culture*. 1985, London Sydney,: Pluto Press ;P xi-xii.

⁶⁷ The longterm effects of the shifts between modernism and postmodernism on current thinking remain to be seen, and may be best understood in light of future philosophical movements.

⁶⁸ Chatman, S., *Story and discourse : narrative structure in fiction and film*. 1978, Ithaca: Cornell U.P.

Exploring structurally written narrative as realist texts remains as valid as presenting traditional Greek tragedies within post-modern writings, and in order to discuss narrative effectively it is important to build tools from a variety of techniques.

Narratology provides the tools to explore texts across a variety of genres by exploring the verbal (perspective and point of view), the semantic (thematic and ideological) and the syntactic (temporal and logical progression) elements. Classical and realist approaches to narrative underline the importance of both strong characters and believable plots, while at the same time modernist/post-modernist and structuralist/post-structuralist approaches demonstrate techniques in how language and form can be effectively used and provide methods of deconstructing language. By creating an amalgam of these tools we can effectively explore and create significant narrative texts for the reader.

Such an amalgam exists in *Natural Habitat*, where the classical and realist emphasis on strong characters and believable plots is tempered against the modernist/post-modernist and structuralist/post-structuralist play of exploring language through deconstruction. By presenting the story as both a traditional novel and as a work of hypertext, the focus of this amalgamated approach can be emphasised. While the traditional novel demonstrates the manner in which the evolution of the characters and plot in a linearity can create a strong narrative that is engaging to the reader, the hypertext work puts into practice the idea that the whole of the work is something more than the sum of its parts, and uses a process

of deliberate and reader-driven selective reading to create a different reading by the changing nature of context. The story itself is constructed to utilise the strengths of these varied approaches, creating something of a half-breed; *Natural Habitat* works both as a traditional linear narrative as a conceptual work that explores the importance of context to conveying meaning. The hybridised text remains unaltered across the two mediums, it is instead the technology of the medium that enables these different operations of the text to come to the fore.

How can narrative engage readers?

In the beginning was the word, and then came the narrative. For as long as we have recorded history we have had narrative, and arguably there was narrative long before then, told in words we can no longer hear and in languages we will never again understand. Narrative is one of the most basic technologies we have developed, and it is so ingrained in our culture and lives that we rarely notice its importance, yet we utilise narrative incessantly to record, analyse, relate and comprehend. Narrative is not restricted to being a tool for human beings; bees tell narratives of plundered pollen treasures with exotic dances, just as ants tell their community of dangerous escapes from attacking hordes by leaving trails of pheromones as a guide. As unique as humanity is, the basic tool of communication and comprehension is not ours alone. What is unique to humans, however, is the creation of narrative for its' own sake.

“To imagine the origins of storytelling we need to tell ourselves a story.”⁶⁹

Reading the above paragraph, it can be said that the reader is required to visualise or otherwise recreate elements of the argument. The terminology used to relate the idea that insects and other life rely on narrative as we do no doubt created images of bees dancing away⁷⁰. Just as the idea of ants leaving pheromone trails conjures images of cute little ants, warning their fellows of a menacing spider ahead, or of menacing insects viciously slicing their pincers as they chase down the trail of a poor defenceless grasshopper. The narratives created to explain these concepts aren't necessary to understand the context. Instead, these mentally constructed narratives reveal more about their interpreter than they do about the concept, acting as the tool of comprehension and interpretation available to the interpreter. Is the reader frightened of insects? Then the story they envisage to understand the concept may have dark overtones, or vice versa. Even the language used to frame the concept influences the images that spring to mind, where 'plundered' may evoke images of pirate bees just as 'dangerous escapes' might bring to mind a miniature rocky surface or some other thrilling location. No matter the image, there is in a broad sense a narrative being re-produced by the reader, and it is this narrative that allows the reader to interpret meaning from such statements. The narrative that is produced by the reader cannot realistically be unrelated to the original, but the end result can still be for the progenitor a narrative that is an anathema. Narrative in this sense creates a working context for conceptual communication, rather than a strict language base.

⁶⁹ Kearney, R., *On stories*. Thinking in action. 2002, London ; New York: Routledge. P 5.

⁷⁰ Perhaps they were friendly and cartoon-like, or savage killers that buzzed and dove madly?

When we critically discuss narrative, however, we rarely mean the inner narratives we all use to interpret and re-contextualise information, but rather the external stories we present to the world, be it in writing, verbally or any other variation of form. Historically, it is implicit to the theorisation of narrative that mental reconstruction occurs and, as such, the very idea that different readers may interpret narratives in potentially disruptive ways is ignored for the sake of creating a cohesive argument about narrative. Returning to the real world, the naivety of this assumption is peculiar. One of the strengths of cultural communicative studies is that it at least acknowledges that different readers will view narratives according to aspects of their culture, rather than asserting the supremacy of a universal narrative and language. Narrative stories cannot be treated like mathematics regardless of Formalist beliefs; there are no absolutes when looking at the narrative presented and the reconstruction of that narrative. Instead, narrative serves as a context for interpretation, whilst at the same time setting the boundaries of interpretation with the ideas of the author presented in a fashion that is intended to convey meaning to the reader. Rather than completely distance the author from the text, Umberto Eco has suggested that the author can influence the interpretation made by a reader, “His argument involves three concepts: the intention of the author (*intentio auctoris*); the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*); and what he calls the intention of the text (*intentio operis*). (...) Eco argues that while the intention of the work cannot be reduced to a pre-textual intention of the empirical author (...) an understanding of this empirical author’s intention nevertheless may serve to assist the model reader (that reader posited by

the intention of the text, the *intentio operis*) in excluding or discarding certain unlikely, improbable, or even impossible interpretations of a text.”⁷¹

In fact, it is this idea of context that becomes so important when examining narrative texts. Within the narrative text there is an implied reader and an implied interpreter, the story is in essence being narrated by someone to someone else. Whether the reader is the implied interpreter, as is often the case in confessions, or an uninvited eavesdropper, as often appears to be the case in epistolary writing, the narrative text is being placed into a context, “(...) it involves a narrator disclosing a secret knowledge to another, as a speaker to a listener, writer to reader, confessor to confessor.”⁷² Within the context of the narrative text there lies a level of mediation. When authors write a story, they create a narrator and a narratee, and it is between these two conjured creations that the story is told. When readers interpret a narrative text, this process is disassembled, and meaning is recreated by retelling the narrative in a context that readers can understand. Here, however, the author’s method of presentation adds new context to the narrative, as the reader is aware of the relationship between the narrator and the narratee, and uses this information to understand the narrative.

Natural Habitat, the creative component of this thesis, relies heavily on context in order to create a complex narrative. One of the underlying goals of the story is to demonstrate that as context is shifted through the use of technology, as allowed in the hypertext format, the text itself takes on new meaning for the

⁷¹ Bondanella, P.E., *Umberto Eco and the open text : semiotics, fiction, popular culture*. 1997, Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press. P 129.

⁷² Foster, D.A., *Confession and complicity in narrative*. 1987, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, New York: Cambridge University Press. P 2.

reader. In order to engage with *Natural Habitat*, readers need to be able to recognise the context the story is placed in; the characters that are retelling the story, the genre rules that apply to the story, and the implied story that lies between the lines of the text. By identifying the broad attitudes of the main character, the reader can contextualise the impact that events in the story have for those characters, and in turn the significance of events to the story as a whole. Appreciating the genre rules for the text allows the reader to create expectations of how the narrative will progress; this process is vital to creating narrative tension in a piece, as playing both with and against these expectations is a key element of generic works. Finally, the narrative itself carries an implied context in which it can be re-contextualised, whereby the reader can translate genre-related events to a broader realist reading, and construct another reading of the text.

While the intentions of an author will on some level include the desire to communicate with the reader, it cannot be argued that a reader automatically has the same desire to listen. A reader may have an external influence to read a text, which can in turn make them resistant or hostile to the reading process, or perhaps a reader is distracted or unable to concentrate; there are many factors that can influence how open a reader is to an author's message. It is in the process of narrative storytelling that the author attempts to engage the attention of the reader. As a reader progresses through a text, the author's narratee and narrator require the reader to reorganise the information, encouraging the reader to actively reconstruct the narrative they encounter into their own re-contextualised story. It is in the complex relationships of the narrator, narratee, and story that the author can recapture the attention of the reader, and best communicate their narrative.

Most theory pertaining to narrative is concerned with engaging with the text in one manner or another. The focus of contemporary approaches to narrative is not on the reading process itself, instead looking to the elements of construction or the work itself as some sort of rigid and fixed source of information. The one element of the equation of reading that is readily ignored in contemporary thought on narrative is the role the interpreter plays. It is the interpreter who must engage with the text, just as it is the interpreter who must reinterpret the text, and ultimately, it is the interpreter who will be the deciding factor in how well a text is understood and how effective it will be. What value then lies in exploring narrative structurally or in any other de-contextualised manner? Does such an approach render more information on what the interpreter understands, or rather does exploring the structure give more insight into how the progenitor may create?

CHAPTER 2: STRUCTURE

What is the importance of structure?

In order to have a better understanding of narrative, it is important to be aware of how they are constructed. When explored externally, that is, considered in relation to other stories in a society, it can be said that the boundaries of a discrete narrative are not easily defined. A narrative is always going to have connections to other stories within a culture, be they similarities inferred by the reader or direct inter-textual references. “No culture is watertight, and no nation can completely seal its borders against foreign influences. There are as many (if not more) constant borrowings, translations, and crossings between cultures as there are between individual nations.”⁷³ Similarly, when exploring a narrative internally, to understand the impact of a single narrative, it can be seen that a narrative is not an indissoluble object; a narrative is a construction of elements of language and meaning. In exploring narrative we often turn to the structures used to create that narrative, hoping to gain insight from the building blocks used to construct narrative as a whole. Given the complexity of narrative, the structural elements explored are often limited to components that the critic or reader believes contain the most significance, and as such are subjectively chosen based on the interpreter’s priorities.

The following discussion expands upon the concepts of form and structure explored in greater detail in Chapter 1 – Narrative. While subjective, there are

⁷³ Lyons, B.G., *Reading in an age of theory*. 1997, New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. P 22.

certainly prevalent choices made in examining narrative structure. Some formal characteristics are often examined, such as the meter and tone of poetry, the mode of narration and historical archetype of a novel, the number and length of acts in a play, the breakdown of epic shots to close up camera angles in a film. While these elements are primarily technical in nature, much of the meaning that an interpreter takes from a narrative is inferred from the technical handling of the narrative; it is by acknowledging the technical aspects and assigning the ‘correct’ (or most appropriate) form that a narrative is contextualised for an interpreter. “The most obvious way in which a text ‘registers’ the effect of its context is in the selection of vocabulary.”⁷⁴ By recognising that these markers of form exist, and understanding the effect that form can have on contextualising narrative, it becomes possible to analyse and construct narrative effectively. An interpreter can make comparative judgements across multiple narratives by acknowledging the rules of form that a narrative is following. The rules of form provide a common background against which a narrative can be explored, analysing it in the context of similar structural forms. This analysis is often used with plays and in particular Greek tragedies, where the expectations of the form delineate not only the construction but also the progression of narrative structure that should follow, and if a narrative does not follow this form and structure, then a narrative is measured in its distance from the formulaic canon.

Natural Habitat is structured to utilise the delineation of forms to best effect. In broad terms, the narrative splits from one realistic mode to four distinct genres, as the characters are separated. Previous discussion of realism and the

⁷⁴ Montgomery, M., *Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature*. 2nd ed. 2000, New York: Routledge. P 67.

realistic mode of writing is first introduced in Chapter 1 – Narrative. The realistic mode used in *Natural Habitat* refers specifically to an attempt at creating an authentic, plausible and believable world for the story bookends, diary sections and implied narrative, and as realistic a form of genre fiction possible. It is the goal of this realistic mode of writing to create believable worlds that remain internally consistent in their use of reality and magic reality. The importance of clarifying the distinction between reality and magic reality becomes apparent when considering the movements of characters into their genre settings. This movement requires several shifts in contextual markers for the reader to have an indication of the appropriate genre to read in. The detective fiction genre work is immediately put into such a context by placing a noir veneer and ret-conned story framework around the character. This is done as the perspective modes from a limited 3rd person to a 1st person, suggesting the changes are intrinsic to the character's mode of interpretation. The end goal is to allow the reader to begin to view that narrative stream with the caution and scepticism it rightly deserves.

However, the fantasy and science fiction streams require a slower approach to the contextual change from the realist mode of the introduction. This is because in both science fiction and fantasy, it is not uncommon to encounter a shift in temporality or physical location, and that oftentimes the characters only begin in their genre-related worlds after just such a shift. The horror fiction genre requires the strongest break in context in order to begin, where the element of transition is not anywhere near as common, but the reader still needs to have suspension of disbelief and acceptance of supernatural ideas. As such while the realist mode context is broken early, with the death of the character raising doubts

as to the continuation of the story, only for the next segment of text to begin drawing in the supernatural elements and set the reader up for the genre shift.

Examining the content of a narrative can reveal how the narrative has been constructed to utilise the existing patterns of genre in order to create context: “genre can be defined as a structural pattern which embodies a universal life pattern or myth in the materials of language....”⁷⁵ By examining the structure of a narrative for key markers of a specific genre, such as fantasy creatures or dramatic dialogue, the interpreter gains the information keys required to contextualise the narrative. When a narrative contains the markers of several genres, the interpreter can acknowledge the existing patterns of these genres, combining them to create new expectations for the narrative. The rise of multi-generic works adds to the complexity of the situation, for while one reader may recognise the elements of both included genres, another may only read for a single expected genre. This in turn can lead to difficulty or oversimplification occurring in multi-generic works, where the progenitor desires to ensure the context of the piece remains clear and understandable, by drawing on the most obvious elements of a particular genre. Multi-generic works are perhaps identified more often in film, where the visual elements of a genre (for example horror; gore, stylistic violence) are applied to a film that would otherwise fall strongly within another genre (working with comedy; slapstick humour, exaggerated characters, ridiculous scenarios) to create

⁷⁵ Cawelti, J. G., “The concept of formula in the study of popular literature” in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 72.

a film that can be categorised as either or both (such as *Army of Darkness: Evil Dead 3*⁷⁶).

The most common method of examining narrative structurally occurs when an interpreter compares the events that occur linearly in the narrative to their own expectations of what may result from that event, and interprets the information accordingly. “To understand a narrative is not merely to follow the unfolding of the story, it is also to recognise its construction in ‘storeys’, to project the horizontal concatenations of the narrative ‘thread’ on to an implicitly vertical axis; to read (to listen to) a narrative is not merely to move from one word to the next, it is also to move from one level to the next.”⁷⁷, a process of not only assembling the syntagmata, but of considering them paradigmatically and achieving an overall construct – narrative. The structure of narrative contains language codes that allow an interpreter to not only interpret a narrative, but to have expectations and make predictions as to where that narrative will progress. Often, a narrative is categorised by an interpreter as either good or bad, and subjective as this assessment is, it is often an indication of how well the narrative met the interpreter’s structurally coded expectations.

The structure of all narrative provides the interpreter with the information needed to make meaning, even as the interpreter chooses what structural elements to take meaning from. Garry Gillard raises an interesting idea, essentially saying

⁷⁶ *Army of Darkness*. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Bruce Campbell, Embeth Davidtz, Marcus Gilbert. Universal Pictures, 1992 (motion picture).

⁷⁷ Barthes, R., “Introduction to the structural analysis of narratives” in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 81.

that the ‘Alien’ films rely on knowledge of colonisation⁷⁸. “The ‘Alien’ series of films (*Alien*, *Aliens*, *Alien3* [*Alien Resurrection*, *Alien vs. Predator*]), might be familiar examples to you. Without the historical background of colonisation that we all share, the films would have much less force; in fact, without that, they would not even have come into existence.”⁷⁹ While in this instance Gillard is discussing post colonialism, it is the context of colonisation that allows the structure of the ‘Alien’ films to succeed; without historical examples of nations invading other nations, and violently conflicting with natives and other immigrants, the reasoning behind these films would seem ludicrous.⁸⁰ It is (amongst other things) the knowledge of colonisation that provides the structural key for interpretation of these films. Without having expectations of narrative, if structurally encoded markers of genre, form, character or plot were not cueing in an interpreter, not only would narrative meaning be difficult to construct, but also there would be less engagement for the interpreter. It is the expectations of the interpreter that create the engagement with the reading experience; without providing the narrative tension by diverging from the interpreter’s expectations, narrative would serve little purpose. This is reflected in the function of narrative within culture itself, because even as the narrative/culture continues to change, so to do the expectations of the interpreter within that culture. “Looking at the

⁷⁸ Gillard, G., Australian Association for the Teaching of English., and Wakefield Press., *Empowering readers : ten approaches to narrative*. 2003, Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press in association with the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. P 115.

⁷⁹ Gillard, G., Australian Association for the Teaching of English., and Wakefield Press., *Empowering readers : ten approaches to narrative*. 2003, Kent Town, S. Aust.: Wakefield Press in association with the Australian Association for the Teaching of English. P 115.

⁸⁰ It is rather far fetched to believe that as a race we are so stubborn as to travel light years to pick a fight with other people over a barren ball of dirt, but it is this precise act that has occurred numerous times in our history, even in the history of our nation.

history of literature, it seems that literature has sometimes maintained a conservative register and sometimes a liberal one. Interestingly, the shifts between liberal and conservative registers seem to parallel shifts in society and in the place literature has in society (roughly indicated by whether poets think poetry is a way of preserving the language or of rejuvenating it).”⁸¹

Natural Habitat relies on a similar broad shared historical experience to be relative to the reader. While relying heavily on aspects of the supernatural and futuristic, and dealing heavily with crime, violence and on more than one occasion murder, the story itself is written to draw these experiences back to the context readers are more comfortable with. The violence is often portrayed in an abstract or stylistic fashion, baring more than a passing resemblance to contemporary action films and comic-style freeze frame narrative storytelling.⁸² The supernatural and futuristic elements are described from the point of view of the main character, who then seeks to relate these events to historical equivalents. The isolation, and in some cases the emotional abuse that the characters subject themselves to over their actions is the common cornerstone between the genre elements of the story and the common shared human experience. Reinforcing this, the diary elements of the story further drive home the idea that similar events could and do happen in our own current world, allowing the reader to actually reconstruct a realist mode interpretation of the story if they so desire. Despite the genre-specific settings, the characters are acting and portrayed as real people, and

⁸¹ Montgomery, M., *Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature*. 2nd ed. 2000, New York: Routledge. P 71.

⁸² This is not contradictory to the idea of a realistic mode in the novel as a whole. The end result of the stylised form of violence is to create momentary images of violence. While not authentic directly, these images are more in line with how memories of violence are thought to be kept in ‘snapshot’ form as a result of shock. While the portrayal itself is not authentic, the lingering imagery is far more in line with how violent acts are believed to be remembered, as very narrow focus images and minutiae drown out broader details.

the decisions they make often reflect decisions that typical characters in genre fiction would not make as a result.

How can form affect structure?

In a similar way to how the structure of a narrative provides the key information needed to re-contextualise it, the medium that the narrative is presented in provides an interpreter with information on what structural elements to interpret. As it becomes more common to encounter narratives that are presented in a variety of mediums, such as transitions from novel-to-movie, movie-to-game, history-to-play, so to it is more relevant to focus on the differences that medium brings to narrative. As a prime example, the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*⁸³, while in many ways fundamentally unaltered in its translation to the film medium, is nonetheless open to a significantly different interpretation between one medium and the other. In saying they are fundamentally the same, the linearity of *The Lord of the Rings*⁸⁴ remains mostly unaltered across both mediums, and if both the film and the novel were summarised the end result would be very similar⁸⁵. When reading the novel, there are significant segments of the text which are devoted to describing the creatures, weapons and scenic setting of middle Earth, pages upon pages of descriptive text focusing on the minutiae of Tolkein's fantasy world. In the film version, this information is conveyed in much more succinct language of the epic shot and the close up, where a vast amount of written language is summarised within discrete visual moments. These moments are still presented as lavish and indulgent

⁸³ Tolkein, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*. Reprinted 1992, London: Harpercollins.

⁸⁴ Tolkein, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*. Reprinted 1992, London: Harpercollins.

⁸⁵ Specifically, the narrative plot would be similar, as would the major events in both narratives.

representations of the fantasy world, but the interpreter is assumed to understand that an epic shot in film carries the same weight as the extensive detail within the novel, but within a fraction of the length of the narrative.⁸⁶

“The [...] contrast between film and prose, however, rests on the distinctive features of the two media and upon the different kinds of signification involved in them. Prose as a medium depends upon linguistic signs where the relationship between the material of the sign (sounds or letters) and that which is designated by them is quite arbitrary. [...] In film, by contrast, the signifying material (visual shapes projected in patterns of light and dark) has a much closer relationship to that which is signified. The film (or video) image resembles in visual terms the reality which signifies or depicts, and so its relationship to reality seems more obvious, direct and easily intelligible.”⁸⁷

Arguably the negative to this succinct view of Tolkein’s world (and film as a medium) lies in the vast amount of information that is presented in a purely visual format; how many viewers of the film would have noticed that the fellowship of the ring left Lothlorien with Elven cloaks?

This summary of the scenic/descriptive elements of *The Lord of the Rings*⁸⁸ significantly shortens the length of the source material; within the

⁸⁶ Be this the number of pages within the text or the frames within the film.

⁸⁷ Montgomery, M., *Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature*. 2nd ed. 2000, New York: Routledge. P 246 – 247.

⁸⁸ Tolkein, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*. Reprinted 1992, London: Harpercollins.

language of film, picturesque shots alone are not enough to create a film.⁸⁹ Here however, what might be considered to be the flaws of the novel are the strengths of the films. Whereas in the novel much of the wars, battles and confrontations are given little attention or even implied, the film medium takes these same events and creates huge action scenes from them. The destruction of Saruman's tower, the escape from the Moria, the battle at Helm's Deep, these are examples of the scenes that the filmic trilogy explores in much more detail than is ever given in the novels. These scenes all feature structural characteristics of action films, such as dynamic camera work (following projectile weapons, or character perspectives), highly choreographed fight scenes, large amounts of auditory and visual effects all intended to not only portray narrative tension in the film's story, but to create physical tension in the viewer too. Where the reader of the novel is permitted to imagine these moments per their desires, the film viewer is asked to accept them as integral to the narrative. Structurally, the extravagance of these types of scenes encourages the viewer to reconstruct the narrative in a different fashion; no longer is the tale of the ring-bearer a fantasy novel, but rather its genre is supplanted by that of an action film, and the viewer interprets the narrative accordingly.

In action films it is formally acceptable for one character to ridicule another in the heat of battle, such as Legolas offering to provide Gimli with a box to stand on at the battle of Helm's Deep. This unlikely camaraderie presents evidence of developing friendships between characters with an established antipathy, and it is these scenes that reflect the complexities of their characters.

⁸⁹ This assessment is subjective, but examining the majority of releases that reach the cinema it can be seen that few films are driven purely by setting, and these are rarely commercially successful films. *Waterworld*, a very scenic but financially disappointing film stands as a good example.

This type of character defining moment provides the viewer with information identifying the hero characters of the film, while at the same time foreshadowing the expected events to follow, such as the competition of counting fallen enemies in battle. Alternatively, prior to tragic events within the films, the death of Boromir, the conflagration of Denethor, Gandalf's fall to the Balrog, there are scenes that foreshadow them. Whether by showing harried flight, confrontations between the characters involved, or farewells from characters, the tragedy that is to follow is flagged for the viewer. Structurally, the action film gives the viewer warning before eliminating a major character, usually giving the actor a scene in which to create a defining moment before his character is killed. Denethor is portrayed as having lost his sanity, Boromir is tempted by the one-ring but is at the same time loyal to the fellowship's cause, Gandalf's portrayed image of frail mortality is shattered.⁹⁰ It is in these scenes that the viewer is given a version of the character that can be measured against the tragic event that follows, in order to evaluate the impact that tragedy will have on the story. When these scenes appear, the viewer is given an expectation as to the departure of a character, and this is a standard practice for the form. The reader of the novels, however, has little need for a single defining image of the character, as the reader has had time to develop their own interpretation over the progression of the text.

Natural Habitat is presented in both novel and hypertext mediums, but the differences are much more subtle than between film and the novel. The interaction of the story and reader is where the difference lies, and beyond the tactile experience of reading the novel, there remains little the individual reader can do to

⁹⁰ This is done when Gandalf stands alone against the Balrog and bars his passage, an act a normal elderly man could not accomplish.

create multiple readings; short of arbitrary narrative jumps, any differences in reading result from the varying levels of attention to detail the particular reader maintains in subsequent attempts. The hypertext rendition presents the opportunity however for the reader to select a focus of reading, emphasising the exploits and adventures of one character/genre over another. This in turn creates a change in story pacing that otherwise would not exist, at least from the perspective of the reader. This can lead to a somewhat different emotional response to a character's progression, where the impact of events can be strengthened or lessened by the change in narrative tension as a result of selective reading, and while subtle, will develop a more varied response upon re-reading the hypertext work. *Natural Habitat* is intended to emphasise these differences, structured to create moments of narrative tension that are ready to be read differently depending on the reading patterns of the reader. By eliminating a genre from the reader's preference, information that is lost from that reading can create additional tension as to the narrative's progression as a whole, as well as creating new uncertainties for the reader to explore.

Specifically then, the hypertext version of *Natural Habitat*, unlike the novelised version, facilitates multiple readings by way of allowing the reader's selective reading patterns⁹¹ to eliminate information they deem undesirable⁹², with the end result being a change on the context of the narrative. *Natural Habitat* itself is structured in a segmented fashion, and the narrative it tells is intended to be intelligible on a segmented, streamed and complete level. That is to say, each

⁹¹ Based on character preference and genre preference, in most cases.

⁹² Undesirable, or superfluous, or uninteresting, or even irrelevant. The real freedom that the hypertext form of *Natural Habitat* encourages is the freedom to selectively read from preferred genres.

segment of narrative has a beginning, middle and end, as does each genre stream of narrative, and the overall complete narrative made from combining those streams. The choices made by the reader in combining these elements can influence the context of the story and allow for the reader to change how they interpret events, without necessarily changing the story directly or polluting future readings.

Theoretical approaches to structure.

Comparing different representations of narrative across forms is possible when we are discussing a reinterpretation such as *The Lord of the Rings*⁹³, but making the same types of structural comparisons over two different narratives also requires a comparative base, and it is here that the formal approaches to structure are most useful. Due to the subjective nature of the structural elements chosen in comparing narratives, adopting a broad standardised approach can provide a new perspective to consider. While the ideologies behind narratology approaches differ, many follow the lead of structuralism in breaking narrative down into several key areas. As narrative requires a narrator, analysing and comparing not only the narrative but how it is narrated can be illuminating. Examining the time, space, personae, acts, events, attitudes and ideologies of a narrator's story allows for the separation of narrative into different aspects for comparison.⁹⁴ By segmenting these structural elements, it becomes possible to compare narratives that are superficially quite disparate in nature. Many of the perceived differences in narratives come from the building block requirements of particular genres,

⁹³ Tolkein, J.R.R., *The Lord of the Rings*. Reprinted 1992, London: Harpercollins.

⁹⁴ Ruthrof, H., *The reader's construction of narrative*. 1981, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. P 5.

whether we are discussing genres of form and content. It is by exploring the relationships that exist in these structural elements that a cross-genre/form analysis can be made.

By including the progenitor as the focal point for analysis, structuralists consider not only how the temporal, spatial, events and actions of the narrative progress, but also how the personality, attitudes and ideologies of the progenitor influence the interpretation of narrative. “As it is used by structuralists, ‘structuralist’ means a set of *relations* among *elements* shaped by a *historical* situation. Properly understood, then, no structure could be *totalised* or understood in its entirety or essence.”⁹⁵ This type of analysis is also modelled after the linguistic approach of Saussure. By exploring narrative much as Saussure explored language and the separation of sign into signifier and signified, the narrative equivalent now shows not only the narrative that is presented, but also the reference point of the narrator who has presented it. “According to Saussure, meaning is therefore the result of a process of combination and selection. The sentence, ‘I saw a dog today’ is meaningful through the accumulation of its different parts: I/saw/a/dog/today. Its meaning is only complete once the final word is spoken or inscribed. Saussure calls this process the syntagmatic axis of language.”⁹⁶ This approach is not limited to language on a sentence level, it is also applied to narrative in a similar fashion. “Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions,

⁹⁵ Rowe, J.C., “Structure” in Lentricchia, F. and T. McLaughlin, *Critical terms for literary study*. 2nd ed. 1995, Chicago: University of Chicago Press. P 25.

⁹⁶ Storey, J., *An introductory guide to cultural theory and popular culture*. 1993, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. P 70.

happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated.”⁹⁷

Using a variant on this approach the differences in genres of content, such as science fiction in relation to detective fiction, can now be compared; not on their genre/content differences, but rather on how they structurally indicate to a reader a manner of interpretation. By choosing narratives that are well suited to comparative analysis due to their relative simplicity or conformity, this relationship becomes more marked. “The affinities between sf and detective fiction are nowhere more astoundingly evident than in the sf short stories published in the earliest days of magazine sf. These stories follow a certain structural pattern derived from the detective story.”⁹⁸ This approach arguably places much emphasis on the re-contextualisation of narrative on the progenitor, because it does not explore how the interpreter will interpret these structural elements, but assumes that the message will be received as it was intended. Post-structuralists, and in particular Derrida, build upon Saussure’s concept of signifier and signified, but conclude that the meaning of the signified is actually itself another signifier to meaning, and that meaning itself is taken from the context in which a sign is placed. “It is only when located in a discourse and read in a context that there is a temporary halt to the endless play of signifier to signifier.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Chatman, S., *Story and discourse : narrative structure in fiction and film*. 1978, Ithaca: Cornell U.P.
P 19.

⁹⁸ Kwasniewski, E., “Thrilling structures? Science fiction from the early *Amazing* and detective fiction” in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 96.

⁹⁹ Storey, J., *An introductory guide to cultural theory and popular culture*. 1993, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf. P 86.

Furthermore, this context does not cement the meaning of a sign, as connotations from other contexts will still be present and will influence the meaning taken. This process breaks language, structure and narrative down further into a referential practice.

Not all approaches to structure need focus on the intentions of the progenitor however. Holloway explores an interesting shift away from the author-centric structuralist approach, developing from (and in many regards critically assessing) an approach introduced by Todorov in discussing *Decameron* tales. Todorov presented the idea that these tales could be analysed by exploring the structure of events that occurred. Todorov proposed that events within the similar narratives he explored entailed subsequent events. Within the scope of the narratives Todorov was examining, these chains of entailed events were to do with tales of illicit affairs, and the events through which the situations resolved. Holloway explores the limitations of this approach, suggesting that one event does not “entail”¹⁰⁰ another, but rather that a “proposition”¹⁰¹ of what is to follow is presented; Todorov’s definition of narrative relies upon one event inevitably leading to another, where this is not an accurate observation. After separating the inevitability of entailed narrative from Todorov’s idea, Holloway then continues on to add the expectations of the reader into his approach; simply by arguing that an event in a narrative propones another does not explain the impetus of the reader to continue with a narrative text, and as such the text must engage the reader in another manner. It is instead the expectations of the reader that these events are

¹⁰⁰ Holloway, J., *Narrative and structure : exploratory essays*. 1979, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P 2.

¹⁰¹ Holloway, J., *Narrative and structure : exploratory essays*. 1979, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P 3.

proponing. Furthermore, the expectations of the reader are altered many times by these narratives, as for each event there is a counter event that propones an alternative conclusion; this pattern of dichotomy continues within the narratives until there is an aberration that causes a final concluding event. Thus the expectations of the reader are continually being altered as alternative outcomes are introduced and discarded. While Holloway goes to some lengths to underline the specificity of this mathematically structural insight (he chooses the dubiously sound $e_t = f [e_i, e_r]$ ¹⁰²) to the *Decameron* tales, he does apply the fundamentals of this approach successfully to *Crime and Punishment*, suggesting that there may be some merit in using similar analysis on other texts.¹⁰³ Certainly any study that is concerned with how the expectations of the reader are met within narrative is of importance for understanding the construction of modern, effective narrative.

New Historicism, an interesting variation on critically approaching narrative, attempts to compare a narrative text to its place in culture. By creating a structure of history and a comparative body of works within the same culture, new historicists conduct analysis of narrative texts by exploring the relationship between the text and the social pressures of the time. "Within the ranks of the New Historicism, literature is considered to be one of the social forces that contributes to the making of individuals; it acts as a form of social control."¹⁰⁴ The underlying approach to new historicism focuses on exploring the politics and ideologies that influenced the creation of a text, as well as the impact that the text

¹⁰² Holloway, J., *Narrative and structure : exploratory essays*. 1979, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P 13.

¹⁰³ Holloway, J., *Narrative and structure : exploratory essays*. 1979, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰⁴ Myers, D.G., 1989. *The New Historicism in Literary Study*.
<<http://www-english.tamu.edu/pers/fac/myers/historicism.html>> (10th July 2004).

has on culture itself. While the structural choices behind this approach are arguably subjective, new historicists still attempt to explore narrative by structural methods, but instead of breaking the narrative down they create a framework of narratives to see what importance the work has within society. While this approach was initially used with renaissance texts, as it becomes popular it is applied to more and more post-modern works, and this can be both a boon and a hindrance when analysing these narratives. On one hand, post-modern works tend to be highly referential to other contemporary and historical works, so that many of the comparative connections that a new historicist desires to make are apparent within the text itself. However, the fact that much of post-modern narrative meaning is inferred from these referential works means that the new historicist has to be aware of a much broader body of historical and cultural works, including the other mediums and aspects of popular culture that postmodernism is absorbed with.

What are the strengths and limitations of structural approaches to story?

The strengths of approaching narrative structurally are two-fold. Firstly, in choosing a structural process to focus on, aspects of the narrative can be simplified for comparison and interpretation, while retaining much of the relevance of the narrative as a whole. Secondly, structurally tackling narrative can in a sense give uniformity to the critical assessment of narrative texts, allowing for the critical interpretation to be comprehensible to others within the field and creating a language for critics to communicate with. Choosing to examine the structural elements of a narrative can allow a critic to see how culture and

narrative are connected, as well as how the interpreter and narrative are connected; structural analysis attempts to define the code that allows an interpreter to make an interpretation of meaning. In creating narrative, structure can be a very important tool, and without an awareness (whether conscious or not) of the elements that narrative is built on, the progenitor cannot relate the narrative in a fashion that an interpreter can interpret.

This is not to say that there are no weaknesses in a structural approach to critical thought, however. The fundamental flaw of a structural approach lies in the tendency for structure to be mistaken for formulae, with narratologists in particular continuing to refine a structural pattern within a narrative into the abstract narration of mathematics. Indeed, it is the goal of many structural approaches to seek such an oversimplification of narrative, yet these formulae when considered alone are insufficient to explain the meaning of the narrative or the manner in which an interpreter reinterprets it, but rather identify a pattern of abstraction that has been observed within the text. Very much a case of not seeing the forest for the trees, this flawed application of a sound interpretive method often sees the meaning of narrative and language marginalised for the structure they are built upon. Furthermore, the more focused the interrogation of structure, the less attention is spent on the meaning of the narrative itself. When creating new narrative, it is not possible for the progenitor to rely entirely upon structure; the construction of narrative, while benefiting from a strong understanding of structure, still requires much more in order to convey meaning effectively and capture the interest of an audience. Many of these weaknesses are common to most forms of critical thought, as the end result is very much influenced by the

expectations and preconceived notions held by the critic; when the question no longer becomes ‘what does this mean?’ but rather ‘what can I make this say?’ the influence of the critic must be acknowledged.

What narrative structure forms the basis of *Natural Habitat*?

Despite the limitations of the approach, my creative piece *Natural Habitat* relies on structure to create narrative. The term is used primarily in a sense of construction however, as a base for the story to be built upon, and to a lesser extent as a context within which to interpret the story. *Natural Habitat* is a complex multiform narrative, and as such required detailed planning in order to be written. The narrative was channelled into five streams of narrative voice: a realist stream, a science fiction stream, a fantasy stream, a detective fiction stream and a horror stream. The realist stream serves to introduce and conclude the narrative, and is based in a facsimile of the contemporary world. Real locations are used in order to base this within the realms of realism, and the perspective is a limited third person; the story is seen from a privileged perspective, but the thoughts of the characters are not revealed. The purpose behind this stream is to introduce and establish the relationships between the characters of the story, and to allow the reader to create their own first impressions of these characters. By placing the conclusion within this realist stream there is a sense of closure to the narrative, the world has been restored to normal, and the characters are reunited and returned to their normal lives. The genre specific streams are constructed in a different fashion, however. Each genre stream focuses on the events of a specific character, following each individually into their own genre-specific setting. The

perspective within these genre specific streams becomes a third person perspective that is limited to the thoughts and experiences of the character in question. Events within each of these streams are further divided into episodic moments, each roughly 2000 words in length. By breaking the narrative streams into small segments, *Natural Habitat* is structured to effectively use the word and screen limitations of the hypertext medium in which it is presented.

The layout for this narrative begins with the realist introduction, and then the reader is required to choose a genre in which they will read the next segment. The separation of the genres is vital to the overall acceptance of the story, because as explored previously, the four included genres each handle transitions of characters differently. While detective fiction does not allow a character to suddenly become a detective, it is quite common to encounter a detective already working on a case. The science fiction and fantasy genres both allow for a transition of character, be it temporally or physically, and as such the character's relocation becomes part of their narrative pacing. Finally, the horror genre requires the most unusual separation from realist to horror, and the character is therefore killed and brought back, facilitating the supernatural elements without impacting directly on the narratives of the other characters. Once the reader has begun to read within a genre, they have the option of reading the events that happen within the same temporality in other genres, or they can progress within the currently chosen genre. This allows for the differences in reading between the hypertext version and the novel version, as described earlier.

Once a choice to progress is made, it is no longer possible to return via the navigational tools to a prior event within any genre. In order to maintain the tension of selective reading, it is important that readers cannot easily return to the prior section if a moment of doubt presents itself as a result of selective reading. By artificially reinforcing these uncertainties through the system of the hypertext, readers are encouraged to attempt to reconcile the narrative as they see it, rather than to track down the information they may have missed. It is open to the readers' personal preferences as to whether they choose to follow a pure genre stream of one character, or whether they try to follow the events that influence all of the characters.

Additionally, the restriction of temporality has been imposed in order to disallow a reader from breaking the realist elements that the streams themselves rely upon; if a reader attempted to return or read events that had previously been bypassed the overall continuity of the story would be disrupted. While the narrative streams themselves are discreet, and follow the actions of a single character exclusively, there are events where two narrative streams influence one another. This occurs when the actions of one character directly impact upon the actions or situations of another character, and the hypertext navigational layout encourages the reader to view the confluence in the narrative streams, or to read on without the additional insight that could be gained from exploring both possible angles of the confluence.

When the narrative is broken down into the four genre streams, the realist stream of narrative is no longer accessible. Events within the realist world

progress however, and the events within the streams are in fact genre-faithful re-imaginings of these events. In order to hint at the events within the realist world that occur, each narrative stream has an additional element: a diary entry. This allows the canny reader to reconstruct the realist narrative running throughout the story, but also serves to reinforce that the decisions the characters have made are similar to real world equivalent decisions they may have been forced to make.

The diary entry for each character for each segment is presented, and records their actions within the realist world. The diary entries are very short, and are presented as a key for reinterpreting the genre-specific narrative within the realist world, rather than a direct summary of events. The diary entries play another role within the structure of the piece however, and also serve as another form of characterisation. It is not only the inner thoughts of the characters being presented, but also how they would like their actions to be perceived by others. This serves to provide another voice of each character, and rather than fact the diaries are showing both faults and strengths of the characters, as each perceives them.

For the reader, this structure is intended to allow some freedom in creating impressions of characters. By selectively reading, the reader can omit the events pertaining to characters they are not interested in, or focus in depth on the actions of all characters involved in certain events. Each voice/narrator within this narrative structure is attempting to build a character from partial information, and this structure allows a reader to interpret the characters and narrative from a wide range of selective or broad approaches. Additionally, as *Natural Habitat* is a work

of genre fiction, this structure allows for the genre preferences of the reader; if a reader has no interest in a particular genre, yet still desires to read the main stream of narrative, there is nothing to force them to read within that genre¹⁰⁵. Significant events that push the overall narrative forward occur within multiple genre streams of narrative, allowing for some flexibility of genre tastes without necessarily breaking the overall realist narrative flow. While this structure was deliberately chosen for these reasons, the implications structure had on writing this narrative were also significant. This narrative is complex in its associations between characters and events, and in order to ensure that the story included everything it was intended to, a plan for both the character and plot progression had to be created. By dividing the narrative into its genre streams, and then breaking these streams into episodic elements, the narrative became manageable in terms of writing and editing. In order for this narrative to function effectively as hypertext, the structure clearly had to be considered in all stages of writing, because it was intended to be transplanted into the hypertext medium, which itself usually requires a segmented approach to narrative. In terms of creating the overall narrative, the segmented structure allowed for non-essential events to be removed, so that the narrative progressed rapidly when compared to traditional novel formats within these genres. At the same time, not every episodic event chosen has an action-oriented focus; rather the events chosen for each character stream are to provide insight into how each character evolves throughout the piece.

How can structure and narrative be used to create a strong story?

¹⁰⁵ The encouragement to do some arises from the additional perspective on events in a particular genre viewed in a different light from another genre.

Structure is as important to effective narrative as a narrator, plot and characters. As we are taught to understand narrative through structure, the basics of narrative interpretation are linked into the structural approaches to language and thought. By being aware of the structural approaches to both reading and writing, the meanings of narrative can be conveyed efficiently and interpreted clearly. Structure within narrative provides both progenitors and interpreters with the linguistic syntax required to communicate effectively. It is this linguistic syntax that allows a progenitor to create new narratives, by providing elements of previously constructed narrative blocks that can be built upon. This same syntax leads the expectations of the interpreter, and it is by consciously choosing to break from these expectations that narratives can surprise and retain the focus of the interpreter.

The complexities of creating narratives are simplified when structure is employed effectively, as the progenitor gains a tool with which to understand the body of the work, while at the same time having manageable pieces of narrative to work with, whether these pieces are segments of text, or conceptual notions of where the plot and characters are headed, or the ideological shifts that take place within the narrative. The importance of the narrative structure to hypertext works is profound, as hypertext relies on its own structural rules in order to function; without consideration of structural thought, hypertext and language systems both lose their associative correlations, and instead appear chaotic, coincidental and unwieldy.

Structure is essential to understanding how to interpret and create narrative. For the interpreter, structure holds the internal key to context, using the elements of the narrative to build a whole based on prior exposure to other narratives. Narrative without structured elements, format and even structured language will fail to convey its message reliably, for without the interpretive context, the interpreter cannot engage with the work.

For the progenitor, structure stands as the most logical approach to narrative construction. By assembling the appropriate elements for their work, and placing them together in a logical, clear and concise fashion, the progenitor can create a work that speaks clearly to their intended audience, while at the same time having existing works as a basis for creating their own. Working first on an overall structure for the work that provides a framework for its presentation, the progenitor then moves to constructing the narrative flow itself before finally working with the syntax of the piece to create their desired outcome.

Structure provides a common ground for the conceptualisation of the narrative by the progenitor, and the re-conceptualisation of that story by the interpreter, but this raises further questions. How do interpreters and progenitors learn the tools they need to understand structure? Are the rules for narrative grouping arbitrary, or do genre categories result along natural conceptual barriers between works?

CHAPTER 3: GENRE

What is genre?

Natural Habitat is a work of genre fiction, and as such has been created with a particular goal in mind; to effectively portray genre-based narrative. This chapter is focused on evaluating the effectiveness of genre writing, its development and its use in contemporary fiction. Critical concepts relevant to the creation of *Natural Habitat* are discussed here, and much of the later discussion is made in reference to these concepts. The rules governing genre reading and genre writing are also critiqued, in order to develop a methodology towards writing genre fiction effectively, based on authorial limitations and reader expectations.

In its broadest sense, a genre is a genus or class of something. “As its etymological roots in the Latin word *genus* (kind) would suggest, ‘genre’ basically alludes to literary types and hence theoretically could be applied to lyric, tragedy, the novel, the sonnet, drawing-room comedy and so on.”¹⁰⁶ In relation to narrative, genre serves as the broad category by which we separate works, by form and content. In this discussion, form pertains to the shape of the thing, while content refers to that which is contained in a work; in broadest terms the form is how a work is presented, both in terms of sentence structure and overall structure of the work, and content is the message of the work. “Genre represents, precisely, a structure, a configuration of literary properties, an inventory of options. But a work’s inclusion within a genre still teaches us nothing as to its meaning. It

¹⁰⁶ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 4.

merely permits us to establish the existence of a certain rule by which the work in question – and many others as well – are governed.”¹⁰⁷ When a narrative is categorised into a genre, it is often analysed for key markers of particular genres, such as elements of the fantastic for fantasy or a focus on character relationships in romance, a selection of chapters and overall length that befits a novel or a work of particular style and length that falls into feature film. As interpreters we are first taught genres as children, and as we are taught the process of categorising narratives we encounter, it is possible to become misinformed as to the rigidity of genre. Later in academic studies, personal pursuits and generational shifts, we begin to encounter more and more narratives that are either transient in their genre, or meet what we understand as the requirements of multiple genres.

Throughout this chapter, there will be examples taken from different mediums, but with an emphasis on film. While genres do vary as they are translated into different mediums, the readiness of film as a shared comparative discussion base cannot be dismissed lightly. Novels, even when widely available, do not have the same saturation in terms of market advertising and exposure as film, giving film exposure to a wider audience. Combining with this higher exposure rate, the brevity of film and visual nature of the work allows for much simpler storytelling, and with genre films, that often means they are more accessible for a genre-based analysis. Particularly relevant here are the stylistics of noir, the visual effects of science fiction, and the nuanced ways in which soundtrack work to build both horror and fantasy. Film has played a heavy role in how genres are imagined and visualised today, and much of the contemporary

¹⁰⁷ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 141.

literary usage of genre-fiction has indeed been inspired by earlier film works. As such, where simple examples of particular genre traits are relevant to this thesis, often the work discussed will be a film. Further on in this chapter, the genre implications of medium are also discussed, in aid of clarifying the different renderings.

As children, narrative is explored in very simple terms, which often means young readers are encouraged to assign a narrative to a single genre. In order to emphasise the linear nature of most narratives, the emphasis is placed on the importance of the tension in the story, as it builds to a climax and denouement, leaving the elements of genre to be described in the broadest of terms. Early teachings also emphasise the importance of character development, as characters are described by appearance, thoughts, actions and the manner in which other characters perceive them. As these concepts can both prove difficult to younger readers, much of the complexity of genre and multi-generic texts is simplified by presenting the idea that genre is explained as being rigid; a set of inviolate rules that govern how a text fits into a genre. This approach is emphasised in activities that revolve around categorising texts as fairy tale or ‘real life’, for example. Yet as we develop a more complex understanding of the categorisation process, we find that we can no longer necessarily make such definitive judgements, or perhaps we find our opinion shifts over time. When considering genres, readers often develop a preference for particular forms and content, and are more inclined to approach new works within a favoured genre than they are to continually tackle new genres.

As genre includes both the content of the work (subject) and the form of the work (medium), an interpreter's genre preference can be as simple as choosing film over poetry or as specific as preferring works of Russian science fiction writers over cyberpunk science fiction writers. Broad genres of form are rarely the sole factor in choosing a narrative, however they do allow an interpreter to dismiss a form that they do not desire to engage with, and also to have a much better expectation of the work. While we rarely distinguish 'horror film' from 'horror novel' in common vernacular, the expectations of two works are markedly different. These terms are in fact a combination of genres, with the content pertaining to horror, and the communication technology or form being the film or novel. Genres can be defined in numerous ways, and once delineated; the barrier of what distinguishes one genre from another is permeable at best. "Underlying all of these morphological considerations is the central problem that definitions of genres, like those of biological species, tend to be circular: one establishes such a definition on the basis of a few examples, and yet the choice of those examples from the multitude of possible ones implies a prior decision about the characteristics of the genre."¹⁰⁸ With many genres of content, narratives are often said to be discussing the same themes, or to have similar narrative elements.

The western, whether it is in film or novel, is most often interpreted as being set in America, and concerned with frontier life during the Wild West period of American history. When looking for signs of a western, interpreters are looking for almost desert-like landscapes, cattle, brown leather, six shooters and ten gallon hats. The expectations of the genre include cattle rustlers, horse thieves,

¹⁰⁸ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 46.

sheriffs and at least one dirty saloon replete with card sharks and for lack of a better word, varmints. Presented with even a few of these elements, it is a short transition to the full blown elements of the genre 'western'. What is interesting, however, is that many of these elements are typical not only of the wild west, but of country life in general, and are not necessarily restricted chronologically to the 19th century.

Narratives set in the Australian bush often carry many of these same elements, and many of the thematic concerns remain similar. So while in a broad sense, Australian bush narratives are westerns, they do not meet all of the criteria, and therefore become a subset genre in themselves. Consider the claim that: "Westerns must have a certain kind of setting, a particular cast of characters, and follow a limited number of lines of action. A Western that does not take place in the West, near the frontiers, at a point in history when social order and anarchy are in tension, and that does not involve some form of pursuit, is simply not a Western."¹⁰⁹ However, the lines of the genre are not so clear cut. As an example, take the character of the cowboy, displaced from his stereotypical home and planted within a modern setting. The film *The Cowboy Way*¹¹⁰ introduces a similar premise, with Kiefer Sutherland and Woody Harrelson acting as modern cowboys in a city setting. The Internet Movie Database (IMDB) has the film summarised as, "Two buddies and championship rodeo partners travel to New

¹⁰⁸ Cawelti, J. G., "The concept of formula in the study of popular literature" in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 73.

¹¹⁰ *The Cowboy Way*. Dir. Gregg Champion. Perf. Woody Harrelson, Kiefer Sutherland, Dylan McDermott, Ernie Hudson. Universal Pictures, 1994 (motion picture).

York to find their missing friend, Nacho Salazar...”¹¹¹, and in this film we have the stereotypical cowboy(s), the pursuit, and a frontier of an unusual nature¹¹². The cowboys may have been modernised, yet the tale is most significantly a western.

Another subset of the western genre concerns German works within the field, which are set within the American Wild West era, but aimed at a German audience. These films are called ‘Osterns’, are much like ‘Spaghetti Westerns’ in that they are similar material as an American western film, but produced by and for a non-American audience primarily. In addition, western works could also be presented as blockbusters (*Tombstone*¹¹³), anti-westerns (*Unforgiven*¹¹⁴, *Dances with Wolves*¹¹⁵), historical pieces, or comedy (*Blazing Saddles*¹¹⁶, *Maverick*¹¹⁷), creating further difficulties in classification. The broad concept of the western can be further expanded, potentially to include all other forms of genre; “In the Western, for example, we sometimes encounter what might loosely but profitably be considered epic elements (such as the hero who is founding a society and the conflict between the temptations of love and the demands of war); but the distrust of the sheriff in particular and the established forces of law in general leads us to speculate about the ways political credos may be influencing and subverting epic

¹¹¹ IMDB., *Cowboy Way, The.*(1994) < <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109493/> > (10th October 2004)

¹¹² When has there ever been an era that does not contain anarchy and tension between social order?

¹¹³ *Tombstone*. Dir. George P. Cosmatos. Perf. Kurt Russell, Val Kilmer, Sam Elliot, Bill Paxton. Buena Vista Entertainment, 1993 (motion picture).

¹¹⁴ *Unforgiven*. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perf. Clint Eastwood, Gene Hackman, Morgan Freeman, Richard Harris. Warner Bros., 1992 (motion picture).

¹¹⁵ *Dances with Wolves*. Dir. Kevin Costner. Perf. Kevin Costner, Mary McDonnell, Graham Greene, Rodney Grant. Orion Pictures, 1990 (motion picture).

¹¹⁶ *Blazing Saddles*. Dir. Mel Brooks. Perf. Cleavon Little, Gene Wilder, Harvey Korman. Warner Bros., 1974 (motion picture).

¹¹⁷ *Maverick*. Dir. Richard Donner. Perf. Mel Gibson, Jodie Foster, James Garner, Graham Greene, James Coburn. Warner Bros., 1994 (motion picture).

motifs.”¹¹⁸ Similar issues arise with all genres for one simple reason; there is no definitive answer as to what comprises any particular genre, what disqualifies a work from a particular genre, and how many genres a work may fall under. “Genre specificity is a question not of particular and exclusive elements, however defined, but of exclusive and particular combinations and articulations of elements, of the exclusive and particular weight given in any one genre to elements which in fact it shares with other genres.”¹¹⁹

Following this idea further, within the broader genre of science fiction we can identify other sub-genres of Russian science fiction, space opera, post-apocalyptic science fiction, speculative fiction, cyberpunk, ‘amazing’ fiction, fan fiction and slash fiction, just to name a few. Advocates for each of these genres will claim that many narratives fall within their genre exclusively, but different interpretations on the restrictions and inclusions of any genre make this an unlikely event. The desire to further classify the works of a genre however, deserves more attention. As the body of works within a genre grows, and opinions of interpreters are polarised regarding the particular strengths and weaknesses of that genre, it seems almost inevitable that there will be a subdivision of the broad genre into secondary, related genres. This process of reclassification may arise for numerous reasons; to allow for outlier works that do not follow all of the restrictions of a genre, to accommodate cross-genre works that are numerous enough to merit creating a new genre, and even to differentiate works that actively

¹¹⁸ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 112.

¹¹⁹ Neale, S., *Genre* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 89.

challenge the restrictions of a particular genre whilst still retaining many of the same thematic or structural elements.

As interpreters, we use genres to guide our reading/viewing choices, and once exposed to an example of genre that interests us, we usually remain interested in similar works. It is easy to assume that once we have a preference in subject matter or form we choose to read similar works because we find them on some level pleasing. However, this ignores one of the most important functions of genre in relation to narrative: genre provides information required to reinterpret narrative. Whether this information comes in the form of expected events, themes, storylines or characters, or in the form of expected layout, style, rhythm or scene transition, it is the genre that has the strongest influence on the interpreter. The role of genre in interpreting narratives cannot be underestimated; genre provides another interpretive key for interpreters in re-contextualising narrative. “One of the closest analogies to the experience of reading [...] is that of operating within a social code: genre, as many students of the subject have observed, functions much like a code of behaviour established between the author and his reader.”¹²⁰ Knowledge of a genre provides knowledge of context of similar forms. Likewise, when encountering a new genre, it is the similarities and differences between other known genres that allow for reinterpretation.

Genre also serves as a manner of evaluating texts against others within the genre, normatively. “Attitudes vary towards creating texts which are recognizably within established genres. In some periods and places, it has been thought a

¹²⁰ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 2.

valuable achievement to produce a good ‘generic text’, such as a detective thriller, a pastoral ode, a sonnet, or a stylized but not especially original pop ballad. In other circumstances, however, this aspiration is dismissed as simply an imitative and formulaic activity, lacking in individual creativity and imagination.”¹²¹ When the interpreter has developed a strong idea of the elements that substantiate a genre, gathered from encounters of other works, it then becomes possible to qualitatively assess the effectiveness of a work within a genre. “At the same time that it leads us to accept these improbabilities, the generic code enjoins the writer from breaking certain other laws. Were we reading a science fiction story or a Gothic tale, we would be quite prepared to believe that a murder had been committed by a ghost, but if the author of our putative *Murder at Marplethorpe* later revealed that his ‘no less silent figure’ was in fact a spirit, we would feel betrayed. Our annoyance would stem not from the fact that the writer had violated the laws of nature but rather that he had violated those of the code.”¹²² Often, knowledge of the generic code will lead interpreters to evaluate a narrative based on how strictly it adheres to a perceived precedent. Naturally this qualitative assessment will not necessarily hold true for other interpreters examining similar works within a genre, and has in the past lead to serious debates over what lies at the core of a genre.¹²³

¹²¹ Montgomery, M., *Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature*. 2nd ed. 2000, New York: Routledge. P 199.

¹²² Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 3.

¹²³ An excellent example would be the discussion involving the superiority of Star Trek over Star Wars, and vice versa. While both are considered science fiction, there exists a desire to argue that one work upholds the ideals of the genre over the other. And in fact, as the impasse in these arguments has become more obvious over time, there arose the need to separate these two canonical works into distinct genres.

In relation to the progenitor of narrative, genre serves another function. While the progenitor cannot necessarily evaluate their work in relation to genres, it is possible to develop a narrative from the expectations of genre. “Fully to understand and interpret the popularity of formulaic stories... it must be remembered that they are, first of all, created for the purpose of enjoyment and pleasure. In this regard, it is no accident that their plots are quite predictable, and thus are insignificant for their own sake; for their entertainment value lies precisely in their satisfying a demand of their readers, that of emotional reinforcement.”¹²⁴ When writing within a genre that has generally accepted guidelines regarding content and characterisation, the progenitor can choose which of these genre-generalisations to adopt, and which to ignore. It is important for the progenitor to be not only aware but conscious of the limitations and expectations of any genre in which they work; a progenitor who is mindful of a genre is less likely to accidentally produce a derivative narrative, and at the same time is unlikely to veer too wildly from the expectations of the interpreters of that narrative. “As we have seen, the reader brings to literary work generic expectations shaped by previous encounters with other works in the same form. [...] One of the most effective ways a writer can use genre is to evoke and intensify our generic expectations only to overturn them.”¹²⁵ The manner in which *Natural Habitat* uses genre to similar effect is discussed later in this chapter.

This understanding of genre is important for more than just writing the piece; in terms of publishing and marketing there are often visual cues to entice

¹²⁴ Kwasniewski, E., “Thrilling structures? Science fiction from the early *Amazing* and detective fiction” in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 96.

¹²⁵ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 37.

interpreters to appreciate a particular work based on its evident genre. Marketing is also used to some extent in driving demand for particular genres: “[G]enres are part of a process of controlling the production of entertainment and directing culture markets. By trading on what has already been successful, formulae can be adopted which can be invested in with confidence.”¹²⁶ Regardless of the goals of the marketing departments, it is these marketing cues that often give an interpreter the first impressions of genre, and any narrative that is misleading or cookie-cutter (cliché) is likely to be judged poorly.

Natural Habitat has been constructed around very conscious positions regarding the relevant genres. As the intent of the novel and hypertext is to emphasise the manner in which expectations influence a reader’s response to genre fiction, deliberate choices regarding the progression of the genre-specific narratives were made, in order to improve the text. The end goal of the implementation of this research being the creation of a novel that, while meeting enough of the expectations of a specific genre, still remains aberrant enough to stand out as having its own appeal and engagement for the reader. It is the expectations of the reader that both need to be both simultaneously met and left unsatisfied for the novel to be effective.

When choosing to focus on a particular genre, the interpreter is actively seeking works that are going to roughly follow a previously encountered pattern. Many genres are accused of being formulaic and generic regarding their themes, characters and storylines, in particular popular genres in literature such as fantasy,

¹²⁶ Montgomery, M., *Ways of reading : advanced reading skills for students of English literature*. 2nd ed. 2000, New York: Routledge. P 205.

romance, and detective fiction, and popular genres in film such as romantic comedy, action/adventure, science fiction and horror. Arguably, however, it is the set formula of these genres that attracts the interests of many interpreters; knowing that a narrative will progress in a largely expected fashion, and yet will still endeavour to contain some unique aspects allows for an engaging and enjoyable experience. As an example, perspective can be used to create an element of novelty, “This double game has been exploited, as we know, in one of Agatha Christie’s novels, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the reader never suspects the narrator – forgetting that he too is a character.”¹²⁷ This kind of twist on a familiar genre can create memorable works that at the same time are fundamentally canonical. “Since the time of romantic criticism, it has been fashionable to denigrate generic prescriptions by focusing on the ways authors transmute or transcend them.”¹²⁸ It is likely that much of the positive response to familiar genre works arises from the ability to focus attention on important genre elements, rather than the interpreter actively working to classify and contextualise a narrative. That is not to say that awareness of generic rules guarantees a single particular reading of text: “We need to remember that, as several critics have observed, generic codes frequently function like a tone of voice rather than a more clear-cut signal: they provide one interpretation of the meaning of the text, they direct our attention to the parts of it that are especially significant, but they do not and they cannot offer an infallible key to its meaning.”¹²⁹ While none of these formulaic genres have a single overriding storyline, there are several common arcs

¹²⁷ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 83.

¹²⁸ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 8.

¹²⁹ Dubrow, H., *Genre*. The critical idiom ; 0042. 1982, London: Methuen. P 106.

and elements that arise often, and the majority of work within these genres would follow some of the pre-established arcs.

Much of the predictability regarding genre fiction lies in the use of conventional norms in defining genres themselves. While more formal definitions may exist in academia, colloquial definitions of genre often capture what is seen to be the key unique or typical feature of a genre. Science fiction (while academically seen as an expression of political views) is seen in the public eye as being narrative revolving around technology, and is expected to contain futuristic or technological themes. Similarly, fantasy as a genre is commonly seen to involve such things as medieval architecture influencing the setting, and re-interpretations of historical cultural roles and disciplines. An awareness of these norms in genre texts allows for the development of cross-generic story elements; by noting conventional norms and having an awareness of the reader response to these conventions, *Natural Habitat* has been written to create relational associations in disparate sections of the text. Events that do not contradict norms in multiple genres can be grafted together through common elements in line with genre-themes to create an enmeshed whole. Likewise, electing to break a norm (such as discarding the typical reverence for technology in science fiction) can flag for a reader a key element of story that can have impact across the broader narrative.

The storylines of the genre-specific elements of *Natural Habitat* are based around the idea of the patterned work. The science fiction in the novel explores the often-treaded plot of a displaced character, and the manner in which utopian

societies fail. The fantasy work utilises the standard pattern of the displaced and reluctant hero, trying to return to normality. The detective fiction explores the standard plot of a relatively simple crime tying together into a much larger conspiracy. The horror fiction relies on the common plot of a rampant beast terrorising its victims. Without breaking the formulae directly of these genres, the novel also tries to subvert the manner in which these plots are explored. The science fiction character is in fact the very reason the utopian society fails, as his actions disrupt what appears to be a functional system. The fantasy character not only fails to undergo a 'true' transformation to become a hero, he instead moves from someone self assured and confident to someone reluctant and uncertain, caught in events beyond his control, that undermine his sense of self. The detective fiction character is as much a criminal as those he 'investigates', and escalates the crimes that occur, rather than solving them. And the horror character becomes the beast, and the plot of the story does not resolve in him shedding his bestial form. While relying on the patterns of genre fiction, the manner in which these plots are explored is where *Natural Habitat* introduces its twist.

Vladimir Propp undertook a serious analysis of the genre of fairy tale in "Morphology of the Folktale"¹³⁰, and created a functional method of categorising and exploring how fairy tales followed set formula, following the actions of characters. The perceived linear narrative simplicity of fairy tales undermines the complexity of their inner logic, and certainly during primary and secondary education more attention is focused on the moral implications of these narratives than the structural and genre-related elements. While this study of the

¹³⁰ Propp, V., *Morphology of the folk tale* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*.
Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 78.

development of fairy tale narrative is interesting, its application seems somewhat limited at first. Propp proposes that the analysis stands as a “*measuring unit* for individual tales”¹³¹, and that “Just as cloth can be measured with a yardstick to determine its length, tales may be measured by the scheme and thereby defined”¹³² Initially this sounds like a restricted analytical tool, however, as a model of similar approaches across other genres, the impact of Propp’s work becomes apparent. David Arthur Adams has applied Propp’s process to the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s ‘Tarzan’ tales¹³³, and arrives at the conclusion that despite a difference in the early elements¹³⁴, similar narrative developments occur as Propp dictates they should occur within fairy tale. The similarities between the genres of fairy tale and fantasy explain some of the coincidence, just as the linear mode of storytelling explains why these events would occur in the order they do, yet the implication that this approach can be applied to other genres is worth exploring.

Would the identified formulaic nature of fairy tales, here applied onto a specific body of fantasy work, carry over to other genres and works? If the answer is yes, then the formulaic nature of narrative regardless of genre may explain the similarities, implying that Propp’s work is in some way too broad and generic, having set boundaries that most narratives follow regardless of genre. If this is

¹³¹ Propp, V., *Morphology of the folk tale* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*.

Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 78.

¹³² Propp, V., *Morphology of the folk tale* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*.

Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 78.

¹³³ Adams, D., *The Jungle Tales of Tarzan: A Morphological Study Based Upon Vladimir Propp’s Structural Theory of Folktales*. 1999. <<http://www.erblast.com/erbmania/nkima/proppjtales.html>> (6th October 2004)

¹³⁴ Rice Burroughs’ works simply bypassing the introductory elements of the fairy tale in the majority of cases.

true, then by making concessions, (as is done in David Arthur Adam's analysis), all narratives are derivative of the overall Proppian model. If this analysis does not hold true over all genres of narrative, as it should in a model that ignores tone, character setting and characters (i.e. elements distinctive to the genre), we have then determined that despite genres themselves being formulaic, there is no over-reaching formula guiding how a genre narrative will develop; narrative itself provides no set formula, instead it is genre that influences the progression of narrative. As interpreters, we follow patterns and formulas implicitly within narrative, just as we have an awareness of the implied narrator and narration. With genre works, we are applying a personalised, established pattern of narrative progression, a framework of conceptualisation, in order to re-contextualise narrative into a personal meaning. This again reinforces the ubiquitous nature of narrative in thought, society and interpretation, for without this framework of conceptualisation, (that we develop from the time we are an infant and continually expand upon in day to day affairs), we cannot understand narrative.¹³⁵

Genres of form and genres of content.

Returning to the meaning of genre, and as we are now aware of the conceptualisation and interpretive functions of genre, we can now consider the different nuances of genre. In modern thought, genre pertains to subject matter, and relates to the manner in which a set of expectations of narrative are grouped

¹³⁵ In my own opinion, while Propp's work serves as an excellent launching point for discussing the concept of expectation and narrative frameworks in use as part of textual interpretation. I do not feel that any one theory can absolutely and definitively provide a complete narrative understanding without becoming abstracted to the point of irrelevancy. I feel that Propp's theory specifically does not enable me to tangibly separate or create a narrative that will only be categorized as a fairy tale. Rather, I believe Propp's work (when used in consideration with conventional norms for the genre of fairy tale), would enable an author to test their work against common fairy tale patterns.

together. In essence, genre in everyday language refers to a genre of content. Historically however, genre also referred to the manner in which a narrative was presented, such as the genre of the novella, short story, and specialised forms of poetry to name a few. In this sense, the term genre is in relation to a genre of form. Hernadi's observation that "[n]ovel and poetry are the only fundamental genres of literature, representing extreme possibilities of its cognitive function; whereas science aims at measurable quantities, novels afford objective, poems subjective, insights into qualitative aspects of human life."¹³⁶, stands as an example of the historical and critical conventions of the word 'genre'. Accepting that the usage of genre still pertains to both functions of content and form, the difference in these two functions of narrative is often overlooked in discussion, causing confusion as to the classification and interpretation of texts along lines of structural construction and narrative subject matter.

However, for the reader, genres of form and genres of content function in appreciably different ways. When approaching a genre of form, an interpreter is given a conceptual framework within which they can analyse the structural elements of narrative, and as such interpret meaning. "Narrative *form* – the thing that makes a story a story and not a list of events – is also the form which human consciousness imposes on real experience to give it meaning. If I lose my job, it is because of the boss's perfidy, not my incompetence. Thus, the narrative sequence – I have a job, the boss is unfair, I lose the job – gives meaning to the experience and allows me to incorporate it into a larger sequence – I am happily married, I

¹³⁶ Hernadi, P., *Beyond genre : new directions in literary classification*. 1972, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. P 86.

lose my job, my wife leaves me – and so on.”¹³⁷ In this case the ‘thing’ refers to the construction of the narrative, as elements that can be combined, and the manner in which it is constructed and presented to the reader. Genres of content, however, do not dictate the manner in which the narrative itself is presented, but rather delineate milestones that the interpreter should encounter in the narrative. Genres of content are therefore not medium specific¹³⁸ in nature, and the elements (characterisation, setting, actions, speech acts) that an interpreter attributes to a genre of content will be applied to all narratives within that genre, regardless of medium. Genres of form are medium specific, yet are not content specific, and an interpreter exploring a genre of form is given the interpretive tools of the form (style, layout, linguistics), which while restricted to a particular form can then be applied over a variety of subject matters within this form.

When encountering genre-grouped narratives, we are rarely presented with direct information regarding both genre of content and genre of form. Locations that are commonly used to convey narratives, such as cinemas, video stores, book stores, etc, the genre of content is usually apparent, and as such is not provided. In cinematic narratives, the indicators of genres of content are usually apparent on the advertising material that accompanies such narratives, just as similar cues are applied to televisual narratives. In bookstores and video stores, which generally carry a much more diverse body of works, it is almost guaranteed that narratives will be divided into single, genre of content categorisations. Occasionally these

¹³⁷ Neale, S., *Genre* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed.

1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 87.

¹³⁸ Once a narrative is discussed in terms of form and content however, this is no longer true. There are elements typical of “horror”, but in addition to this there are elements unique to the “horror novel” or “horror film” that are indeed medium specific.

genres seem irrelevant at best, such as the art-house¹³⁹ genre, the new-to-weekly genre and the discounted books genre. Generally however, the works presented have been assessed by an interpreter, and assigned into the category most appropriate to subject matter.

Occasionally, dual-genre classifications are created in large collections, such as horror/comedy (Evil Dead 3, Gremlins 2, Warlock 2), sci-fi/horror (Alien/s/3/Resurrection, Leviathan, Deep Star Six), romantic comedy (When Harry Met Sally, Sleepless in Seattle). While these genres may seem to be mere combinations of earlier genres, each acts just as a traditional genre would, creating a set of expectations that are genre-specific, and allowing an interpreter to interpret the presented narrative. Indeed, as collections grow in size, it becomes imperative to increase the precision with which narratives are presented, in order for interpreters to encounter narrative works that are genuinely within their desired interpretive field. This size-related effect on genre works in reverse as well, and it is common to encounter a small bookstore that has a sci-fi/fantasy genre, that instead of containing works that combine these two fields, actually contains works that are in any way related to either field. Naturally it must be assumed this non-definitive usage of genre causes confusion quite often, and is evidence that genre is anything but clear-cut and definitive, but rather at best a fluid and broadly graduated tool for narrative categorisation and expectation.

Medium specificity and genre.

¹³⁹ Referring to both form and content, this genre is broadly encompassing, and often films in this category are considered to be alternatively avant-garde or pornographic in nature, with the only constant element of the genre being that the work is likely outside what would be considered a “mainstream” film genre.

Another question regarding genre that is rarely raised refers to medium specificity: Are there specific combinations of genres of form and genres of content that lead to effective narrative? The transition of genres across mediums has given some indication of the strengths and weaknesses of mediums for various genres. If we were to discuss horror in the form of the novel, we will most often encounter texts that can contain quite detailed and uncomfortable events, subject matters and narrative arcs, but at the same time it is moderately easy to create distance from the subject matter, and in turn create narrative tension by placing the reader into the position of the confidant or voyeur. This has the effect of playing against the implicit guilt of those positions to engage the reader. Horror films however, have both a significantly different approach and effect. In written horror, the interpreter is usually presented with a perversion of life, and is given time to consider the ramifications of that perversion. For example, much of the horror in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*¹⁴⁰ comes from following the reasoning behind the horrific actions of the characters. Dr. Jekyll undergoes his transformations with a growing awareness and self loathing, but still finds his way into rationalising his position for both himself and his confidant (the reader). In celluloid horror it is often the suspense that arises from the unknown that drives the narrative. Horror in novels is often alluded to, or even when directly addressed, rarely comprises the bulk of the text. Horror on film almost always provides a very visceral experience, and many horror works have delighted in creating and re-enacting some of the most gruesome scenarios imaginable.

¹⁴⁰ Stevenson, R. L., *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Reprinted 1994, Australia: Penguin Books Ltd.

The difference between the text and the film comes down to the form of stimuli the interpreter is experiencing. Film directors over the years have developed immersive techniques for drawing in the interpreter to a situation. By using clever photography, disorienting or disturbing visual effects and manipulative auditory sensations, the director can emphasise the unnatural or supernatural elements key to their narrative to the viewer. “The actor can be so placed in the frame as to heighten our association with him. For example, his back or side profile may appear on an extreme margin of the screen. As he looks into the background we look with him.”¹⁴¹ Observing an interpreter watching a horror film, it is possible to see the immediacy of this experience acting upon them physiologically; pupils dilate in surprise and fear, muscles flinch in response to startling auditory stimuli, nausea and even hysteria can develop from these stimuli. For the interpreter of the horror film, escaping the immersive aspects of the narrative requires ignoring sensory input or maintaining scepticism and distance, whereas for the interpreter of the horror text, the additional level of interpretation required for the written language already undermines the horrific nature of the content. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the strengths of horror in film are often its weaknesses, as many horror films are criticised for too much manipulation, and too little narrative arc, by an audience that has grown progressively armoured against repeated assaults on primary sensory input. In simple words, many avoid film horror now because of the blood and guts, yet still return to the subject matter in a form that allows more consideration to the themes. Still, it is arguable that horror on film, when constructed effectively and carefully, can achieve a result that text will always struggle to create. This is an example of

¹⁴¹ Chatman, S., *Story and discourse : narrative structure in fiction and film*. 1978, Ithaca: Cornell U.P. P 159.

more than just combining genres of content with genres of form; an effective combination has been made that emphasises the strengths of both the form and the content as a whole.

In general terms, then, there are particular effects that genres of form have on genres of content. Often it becomes difficult to enjoy a narrative in one genre of form that has been encountered within another one; when considering a novel and a film, often the casting of an actor in a character's role may differ from the pre-conceived notion of the interpreter, and thus undermine the immersive nature of the film narrative. It is just as possible however, that the quicker pacing, stylistic presentation and creation of characters and settings that may be far more detailed than the mental imagery evoked by a narrative text, and as such may become an interpreter's preferred form for a work or even a genre. While many interpreters who enjoy popular genres (of content) do so over a variety of forms, it is not uncommon to encounter some who simply cannot accept the limitations, restrictions, trends or authors that work within a genre of form. Broadening the forms in discussion now to include video games, and in particular works that were titled in their formative years as interactive fiction, we can discuss again how an interpreter of a narrative may prefer one form over another.

A good example stands in the recent film *Resident Evil*¹⁴². The film focuses on events and themes liberally borrowed from the video games, and create what is essentially a zombie film set in a pseudo science-fiction world. Much as the game did, (and is to be expected from a work of science fiction) the movie

¹⁴² *Resident Evil*. Dir. Paul Anderson. Perf. Milla Jovovich, Michelle Rodriguez, Colin Salmon. Sony, 2002 (motion picture).

strives to explain the nature of the zombies, the commercial applications of said zombies and the political and social order that caused these events to transpire. Despite remaining true to the video games, often to the point of becoming derivative, the film received a mediocre response from many fans of the particular franchise. Yet why would these fans not enjoy the film so closely based on the original gaming experience? Simply put, it was the level of interaction that was lacking in the film that negated much of its appeal. In the game, the gamer/interpreter is personified as their on screen avatar, and as such is directly menaced by the genuinely frightening zombie hordes; as the avatar's motions are the result of the gamer's actions, in part the gamer's reactions are a result of the avatar's experience. In the film, very little framing was used to project the interpreter into the environment, and rather the role of the interpreter is relegated to observer, as a crew of (typically mindless) characters are systematically wiped out by the (equally mindless, but understandably so) undead hordes.

What the film failed to create, which is also arguably the one strength of the game, is the sensation that the causality of the interpreter's actions has a direct relationship to the fate of the characters. Watching the characters die in the film does not have quite the same emotional pull as accidentally choosing to allow a game character to die by your actions. Equally, the danger within the game often arose from navigational choices; it is hard not to have empathy for a character you control, that you led down a blind corridor whilst having 3 bullets in a clip, and watching them get suddenly and viciously attacked by a lictor you failed to notice climbing around on the roof. The film created the same situations that the game characters encountered, yet it was the element of choice and causality that made

the environment, situation and narrative engaging. As more and more videogame to film and text translations are made, with movies such as *Doom*¹⁴³ and *Alone in the Dark*^{144,145} projected, and the recent release of *Alien vs. Predator*^{146,147}, we are likely to encounter more examples of genres of content that fail to translate well across all genres of form. Interesting to note however, is this; “The Alien Vs. Predator story crossed over virtually all forms of media before becoming a feature film. There was a successful comic book series, toy line, multiple video games, sound track (of the PC game) and even a card series.”¹⁴⁸, which suggests that while the film itself may have not translated well from the concept of the Alien and Predator characters becoming entwined within narrative, there have been well-received transitions that focus on narrative in different fashions.

Natural Habitat uses horror, science fiction, fantasy and detective fiction; all of these genres have been presented in the past as episodic or serial forms. Hypertext’s strength lies in the retrieval and presentation of segments of linked text, and has been used here to emphasise the multiform elements of the piece. It is the episodic nature of these chosen genres that allow for efficient retrieval and presentation of the narrative on screen, therefore utilising the adaptable nature of the hypertext structure without becoming unwieldy to read in the chosen medium.

¹⁴³ *Doom*. Dir. Andrzej Bartkowiak. Perf. The Rock, Karl Urban, Rosamund Pike. Universal Pictures, 2005 (motion picture).

¹⁴⁴ *Alone in the Dark*. Dir. Uwe Boll. Perf. Christian Slater, Tara Reid, Stephen Dorff. Lions Gate Films, 2005 (motion picture).

¹⁴⁵ If Paul W.S. Anderson’s “Resident Evil” and “Alien vs. Predator” only received mediocre responses, Uwe Boll’s (generally bagged) “House of the Dead”, and his anticipated “Alone in the Dark” and “Far cry” video game translations are causing distress to manifest in the video game fan-base.

¹⁴⁶ *Alien vs. Predator*. Dir. Paul Anderson. Perf. Sanaa Lathan, Lance Henriksen, Colin Salmon. 20th Century Fox, 2004 (motion picture).

¹⁴⁷ Whilst only recently released, the response to “Alien vs. Predator” has so far seemed consistent with the response to “Resident Evil”, and it is seemingly again because the genre of film does not provide the same sense of causality that the games have done.

¹⁴⁸ IMDB., *AVP: Alien Vs. Predator (2004)* < <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109493/> > (8th October 2004)

Furthermore, all four of these genres have distinctive visual language associated with them, developed in film and other popular media, emphasising the appropriate imagery for the genre. As *Natural Habitat* is presented in hypertext form, it utilises the visual cues of these genres to reinforce their impact on the reader, encouraging a level of immersion beyond the purely textual representation of the novel while at the same time clarifying some of the potentially confusing changes occurring in the text as a whole. By relying on episodic content and implementing a visual codification for the text, *Natural Habitat* represents an effective combination of form and content that allows the text to function alternatively as 4 linear genre pieces, or a genre-encompassing multiform narrative with complex structure, all without losing an easily understood visual language, depending on the choices of the reader.

Genres explored.

The overall narrative of *Natural Habitat* comprises of five separate genres of content: realism, science fiction, fantasy, horror and detective fiction. Using a broad definition of the fantastic, Todorov suggests that science fiction (scientific-marvellous), horror (fantastic-uncanny/marvellous), fantasy (fantastic-marvellous and marvellous) and detective fiction (uncanny and fantastic-uncanny) are all related genres.¹⁴⁹ Both the diversities and similarities of these genres allow for the development of character commentaries in situations that are unlikely to occur within a single genre piece. The realist genre revolves around a depiction of our modern world; “The style of realism is plain, direct, more or less colloquial,

¹⁴⁹ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 44, 56.

uninhibited by the conventions of other literary genres, and thick with the details of the phenomenal world.”¹⁵⁰ The realist story *Natural Habitat* focuses on a narrative centred within the Amazon jungle in Ecuador. The characters all interact in this the realist genre, and while they do not travel together much, they do encounter other modern-world characters. The storyline of the realist genre fills the role of being the framework within which the other genre-based stories are developed, and sees the characters surviving a plane crash, and encountering a rising dictator and military leader. Ecuador, while not currently ruled or threatened by any such dictator, has had a history of political upheaval between the highlands and lowlands peoples, and as such provides at least a plausible backdrop for armed forces and jungle military camps. The Amazon jungle is also essential for the other genres to develop, as while they travel within their own genre-related stories they are still engaging with the real world, and as such they need an area that is mostly isolated, somewhat dangerous in its own right, and yet still populated and readily able to support life. Because the Amazon jungle is something of an uncommon location in today’s world, the jungle symbolically becomes the metaphor within which the other genre stories occur; it is the urban jungle of the detective fiction, the alien landscape of the science fiction story, the wooded misty forestland of the horror story and the idyllic fantasy world. The realist genre here serves to develop the characters by highlighting their group interactions under both relatively normal and stressful situations, and give an impression of how they might live their modern lives, unlike the other genre specific narratives, which focus in much more detail on the inner stories of the individual, and their own reactions to situations.

¹⁵⁰ Levine, G., “Realism Reconsidered” in McKeon, M., *Theory of the novel : a historical approach*. 2000, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press. P 243.

The genre of science fiction is generally seen to revolve around political ideals, and as such the characters are often rebelling against a political system or criticising a perceived political injustice. “Simplistic readings of these genres [(science fiction and utopian writings)] speak of their *predicting* or *planning* the future though they were the narrative tools of some futurological technocrat. On the contrary, Utopia and science fiction are most concerned with the current moment of history, but they represent that moment in an estranged manner.”¹⁵¹ In *Natural Habitat*, the central science fiction character encounters a seemingly idyllic world that has advanced technology to the point of self sufficiency, a form of utopia. “Central to Utopian fiction, and to the entire mode of romance, is the alternative world imaged by the author. What in the realist novel would be considered ‘mere’ background setting becomes in traditional Utopian writing the key element of the text. The society projected in such a complete manner as to include everything from political and economic structures to the practices and rituals of daily life has long been seen as what the Utopian novel is ‘about’”¹⁵² The technology itself, however, is in many cases an extension of ideas that are already developed within our own cultures, and as such the character finds much of what he sees are gimmicky, needless technological improvements and a self serving society that is determined not to interrupt their status quo.

¹⁵¹ Moylan, T., *Demand the impossible: science fiction and the Utopian imagination* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 176-177.

¹⁵² Moylan, T., *Demand the impossible: science fiction and the Utopian imagination* in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 177.

What is unusual for science fiction is a central character that rebukes the technological pervasiveness of a society even as he (expectedly) challenges the utopian world, and it is this unusual trait that adds interest to the character of the story. Eventually, the character discovers that the self sufficient city of the future is reliant on the continual sacrifices of an outside party, and realises that the idea of something being self sufficient is always going to be a relative term. The message this narrative is portraying revolves around the notion of technology for its own sake, and questions whether the ability to continually develop is necessarily enough of a justification to do so. The character in this stream is representative of a laconic and suspicious male, and as such does not automatically choose to carve a path of destruction through this society, but rather distrusts what he perceives to be as a system full of imbalances.

The fantasy genre has often been accused of revolving around escapism. It has many ties to myth and fairy tale, and is readily criticised as being an oversimplified and indulgent genre, because the author can provide whatever magical or mystical solution to problems they desire, and unlike other genres (particularly sci-fi, horror and detective fiction) there is no requirement to explain exactly how problems are caused or solved, even when a possible explanation is available. In discussing the fantastic, a genre that encompass elements of fantasy and horror, Todorov writes, “There is an uncanny phenomenon which we can explain in two fashions, by types of natural causes and supernatural causes. The possibility of a hesitation between the two creates the fantastic effect.”¹⁵³ In fantasy, there is a reluctance to explain, and as such interpreters require a certain

¹⁵³ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 26.

suspension of disbelief when accepting the narrative. Traditionally, the main fantasy character is transported, either physically or through a sudden change in social standing, and finds themselves in a situation they cannot control or influence. In understanding the limitations of themselves and their environment, they often then come to develop new tools to reach their goals, often developing a magical ability, learning combat arts, or otherwise gaining knowledge and influence within their world, and as an outcome they generally manage to create their fantasy; a world that meets the desires of the main character. In *Natural Habitat*, the central character also becomes transported into a fantastic world, yet this is where the similarity ends. Given his unusual background from the modern world, the central character enters with a number of skills that are common, yet valued in the fantastic world; archery, swordsmanship, survival and medicinal. He is, however, completely unremarkable, and despite his time within the world and an initial encounter that seemingly prophecies more, he eventually ends up joining a military unit and beginning to fit within a relatively normal life. This character represents the rational and self doubting side of the male persona, and is convinced he has suffered brain damage or is living under a delusion, and therefore constantly doubts the events he finds himself in. Maintaining some of the rules of the fantastic world however, the character does eventually encounter a situation that he is uniquely equipped to handle, and in doing so he conquers his self doubt, and creates the perfect fantasy world for himself, a world in which he is sane and he returns to normal society after the horrific events of his crash and abandonment in the Amazon forest.

Horror as a literary genre differs in many ways from horror as a film genre. In literature, horror has undergone periods that are largely tied into time frames and settings more than anything else, and as such has amongst others a gothic, Victorian, modern and futuristic divisions. In film, the focus of horror has shifted to the contemporary, and largely limits itself to an exploration of modern and futuristic notions of horror, whereas horror literature often adopts the settings of prior centuries. While early horror film was tied very closely to the Gothic literature that inspired it, modern horror has in many ways abandoned the period in favour of modern social commentaries. “Historically alongside the work of Corman and Hammer there runs a rather different emergent tradition, superficially very much outside the Gothic formulae and represented in the work of such diverse directors as Hitchcock, Polanski and Michael Powell: films which might be described as revelations of the terror of everyday life, which prise apart the bland surfaces of common interaction to disclose the anxieties and aggressions which lie beneath.”¹⁵⁴

This in itself might explain much of the differences between horror film and horror fiction, because horror is very much focused on what is considered unmentionable (or taboo) in a society. “It is in its concern with paranoia, with barbarism and with taboo that the vital effort of Gothic fiction resides; these are the aspects of the terrifying to which Gothic constantly, and hauntedly, returns.”¹⁵⁵ “The fundamental term here is taboo. The two basic implications of the anthropological concept of ‘taboo’ are ‘sacred’ and ‘unclean’: taboo is the

¹⁵⁴ Punter, D., *The literature of terror : a history of gothic fictions from 1765 to the present day*. 2nd ed. 1996, New York: Longman. P 97.

¹⁵⁵ Punter, D., *The literature of terror : a history of gothic fictions from 1765 to the present day*. 2nd ed. 1996, New York: Longman. P 184.

category into which are placed those anomalous areas of life which resist conventional explication, and which therefore simultaneously demand to be shunned and attract by virtue of their fatal interest.”¹⁵⁶ As modern society has very different ideas of what is taboo than prior ages, what we encounter now often revolves around a very human kind of horror, where our ever growing population encounters more and more mental divergences, more crippling fears¹⁵⁷ and, essentially, a fear of what other humans may do to us. “Contemporary Gothic reflects, and provides a singular symbolic language for the discussion of, preoccupations of our times: capitalist inhumanity, information overload, child abuse, serial murder, pollution and corruption.”¹⁵⁸ It is in a sense a reflection of our own self doubts, when we wonder how much control we can exercise in a world where road rage, substance abuse and suicide are all statistically bombarding us.

“The fascination of *Basic Instinct* – and of so many other recent horror films – with psychology is clearly reminiscent of Hitchcock, but there is more to it: psychology as a science now seems to occupy the hated and feared place in which Gothic once placed the criminal monk, as though the *secrecy* which endures in the therapeutic relationship is now seen as a ‘state within a state’, as a threat to order rather than as a path to a cure, and thus needs to be strangled,

¹⁵⁶ Punter, D., *The literature of terror : a history of gothic fictions from 1765 to the present day*. 2nd ed. 1996, New York: Longman. P 190.

¹⁵⁷ As an example, an irrational fear of open spaces in earlier times would have been very uncommon, simply because there were not really many alternatives, and as such the situation of open space would have been normal. Today, it is possible to develop these fears based on a childhood that has changed significantly from even fifty years ago.

¹⁵⁸ Punter, D., *The literature of terror : a history of gothic fictions from 1765 to the present day*. 2nd ed. 1996, New York: Longman. P 179.

squeezed violently out of existence – lest those secrets should spill over into real life, lest we might thereby achieve an unwanted enlightenment.”¹⁵⁹

Compare this to the horror often within literature, a horror focused on taboos that can be sexual or racist in nature, still a fear of the other, but also a fear of violation of personal beliefs. Todorov, discussing the fantastic/uncanny borderline works of Edgar Allan Poe writes, “In ‘The Fall of the House of Usher,’ it is the extremely morbid condition of the brother and sister which disturbs the reader. In other tales, scenes of cruelty, delight in evil, and murder will provoke the same effect. The sentiment of the uncanny originates, then, in certain themes linked to more or less ancient taboos.”¹⁶⁰ Then consider the religious horrors of possession, demonic assault and moral corruption, and we have a very different body of themes to choose from.

Natural Habitat creates a horror world that visually borrows from literary horror, in that it creates what would appear to be an old European forest, peasantry and tyrannical baroness overseeing the land. The difference between this narrative and much of normal horror revolves around the characterisation; in this the main character quickly changes from hunted to hunter. Horribly injured in the plane crash that strands the characters in Ecuador, the horror character quickly finds he is hunted and tormented by a classic European nightmare, a werewolf. When the character transforms into a werewolf himself however, he finds he has been given the ability and the need to hunt and kill. The character represents much

¹⁵⁹ Punter, D., *The literature of terror : a history of gothic fictions from 1765 to the present day*. 2nd ed. 1996, New York: Longman. P 156.

¹⁶⁰ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 48.

of what is repressed about the male persona, the instinctive, primitive psychology of early mankind that remains part of humanity. It is in the choices the character makes that he breaks with the traditional narrative of horror, and at the same time fights against the darker parts of the human soul. This genre has an expectation of horror however, and while the horror of fighting against primitive urges is psychological, the physical horror that occurs within this narrative borrows heavily from the visual and thematic aspects of modern filmic horror.

Detective fiction has much in common with the uncanny elements of the fantastic, and in fact Todorov attributes the creation of the modern detective fiction genre to well known fantastic/horror writer Edgar Allan Poe.¹⁶¹ Despite often working with similar themes however, where traditional horror sought to reinforce the supernatural interpretation over the logical, detective fiction strives to eliminate supernatural or untenable solutions in favour of the logical explanation. “It is perfectly true that the thriller is based upon the description of deviant acts – murder, rape, burglary, espionage, etc.”¹⁶² Today, popular detective and crime fiction narratives are considered formulaic and derivative. In detective fiction, the main detective character is given a variety of clues and red herrings, and then often proceeds to piece together an idea of what criminal events have occurred well ahead of the interpreter, continually dropping hints and raising their own red herrings, all in order to create what is hopefully a surprising, yet logical, conclusion. “The murder mystery, in which we try to discover the identity of the

¹⁶¹ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 49.

¹⁶⁰ Palmer, J., “Thrillers: the deviant behind the consensus” in Ashley, B., *Reading popular narrative : a source book*. Rev. and expanded ed. 1997, London ; New York: Leicester University Press. P 170.

criminal, is constructed in the following manner: on the one hand there are several easy solutions, initially tempting but turning out, one after another, to be false; on the other, there is an entirely improbable solution disclosed only at the end and turning out to be the only right one.”¹⁶³ However, the subtleties of soft boiled and hard boiled detective fiction are given an unjust cursory summary here, and instead what detective fiction often provides is an insightful look at an unconventional and uncouth detective character that, above all other genre characters, is shown as having personal foibles.

Regardless of whether the detective/investigator is proud, such as Brother Cadfael or Inspector Morse, or emotionally damaged, such as Dirty Harry or Cracker, these characters are rarely perfect, and it is usually their character flaw that the criminal act plays against. The detective characters are driven by their own failing to remedy the failings of others. Pride, guilt and revenge often serve as the motivator that drives a detective to resolve the crimes of others; it isn't enough that they're merely good at their job, but instead they are driven to excel at it by their own experiences. What rarely occurs, except in detective comedy such as the Pink Panther, is an incompetent detective.¹⁶⁴ While the traditional detective may make mistakes, may overlook clues here and there, they rarely fail to piece together a story that the reader themselves could work out. Here is where the detective in *Natural Habitat* enters; a self absorbed, conceited, substance addicted borderline criminal, this character retains the high intelligence of the average detective, yet does not have any of the wisdom to put this knowledge to

¹⁶³ Todorov, T., *The fantastic : a structural approach to a literary genre*. 1975, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press. P 49.

¹⁶⁴ While Colombo might be considered incompetent, his ineptitude was more of a calculated tactic to disarm the culprit, and as such he rarely if ever failed to close a case.

use. Continually hitting brick walls that are actually clues, and ignoring other sensible forms of recourse, this character finds himself acting like a hard boiled detective, pushing his nose into places it doesn't belong and suffering as a result. Keeping with the detective nature of the story, this character in spite of himself manages to discover the criminal events surrounding the disappearance of his friends, and attempts to arrest the party responsible. Seemingly while the crime solves itself around him, this character provides insight into many of the character flaws of the machismo male, emphasising violence over patience, logic over wisdom, and self over others, while at the same time undermining these values.

Each of these narratives in *Natural Habitat* is intended to challenge the traditional elements of these genres, whilst at the same time still adhering significantly enough to these restrictions to discuss the core of the thematic concerns. Often these genres do not focus on the nature of the characters in the fiction, but rather on the plot elements of the narrative, and it is in this manner that *Natural Habitat* challenges the norm. The popularised nature of these genres means that there are many other stories in circulation, some of which are undoubtedly written with in a similar fashion, but it is also in the combination of these popular genres that the story is built. As each character interprets the others within the restrictions of their genre, a new and faceted image is created, and it is through this process that the characters can develop into much broader individuals than they might in any single genre narrative.

The importance of understanding genre when considering either the process of producing or interpreting a narrative cannot be emphasized enough.

Without genre, a narrative does not have a context that allows an interpreter to re-contextualise the work efficiently. Without genre, a progenitor has to produce their own structure and then communicate the manner in which their work functions in order for the interpreter to understand it. Genres can be related by the manner in which they convey content, or the key elements that are important, and so an understanding of genre can be applied outside of works exposed to an interpreter; genre tools can be developed for one genre, and then applied to a similar genre. Genre experience is one of the many shortcuts that allows us to rapidly re-contextualise the concept produced by a progenitor as interpreters, just as it gives the progenitor the framework to convey the concept itself. Simple narratives can be told beyond genre, but as complexities are added, the act of emphasising and de-emphasising structural elements that occurs when an interpreter re-contextualises a work becomes confused, which in turn creates a narrative that has not been written efficiently. Genres of form and genres of content provide a basic syntax for both the shape of a work and the nature of the work, and allow the key facts of the narrative to be identified accordingly. When discussing complex narratives such as multiform narratives then, is it vital that they are placed inside set genres? Do multiform narratives work more effectively in specific genres?

CHAPTER 4: MULTIFORM NARRATIVE

What is multiform narrative?

Of particular concern to this thesis, and *Natural Habitat*, is the technique of multiform narrative. Multiform narrative is an extension of Janet Murray's "multiform story"¹⁶⁵, her term for a work that is "a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience."¹⁶⁶ Multiform narrative is concerned with multiple streams of narrative that, by reason of the physical laws that we believe govern time and space, are in some way mutually exclusive. Even as one stream of narrative seemingly excludes others from occurring, these mutually exclusive elements are combined to create a narrative for the interpreter. For example, characters are within one reality or another, rather than all streams simultaneously, or events that occur within one narrative deny the possibility of the other, and so on. It is common to encounter multiform works within established delineated genres, and this is often a conscious choice designed to enable the interpreter to interpret the structural complexities of the text within the generic simplicity of the content. "Simpler, highly conventionalized texts more completely absorb any reader's cognitive capacity for comprehension than difficult ones – with the richness of structure as readers perceived it in fiction inversely proportional to the complexity and originality of the reading matter."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 30.

¹⁶⁶ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 30.

¹⁶⁷ Douglas, J.Y., *The end of books--or books without end? : reading interactive narratives*. 2000, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. P 2-3.

Multiform narratives are concerned with possibilities, and while they can resolve themselves into an overall linearity, there is no guarantee that such will be the result. In multiform narrative, it is the actions of the characters that are of interest, rather than primarily focusing on the final linear outcome, as in most traditional narratives.

Working with text has allowed much experimentation into linearity and narrative structure. As new forms and even genres have popularised techniques, the body of structural and technical understanding required to assemble narrative has grown substantially. Multiple characters driving a single story, shifting perspectives, peripheral information, 'red herrings', paradox, inter-textual connections and a myriad of other approaches are all now intrinsic to the narrative process.

Generically we encounter multiform narratives most often in science fiction, where contemporary progenitors delight in breaking rules of time and space in order to provide insight into human nature. Usually, given the complexity of the multiform elements of the narrative, and the narrative's place within a continuing linear series (i.e. *Star Trek* episodes that focus on time travel)¹⁶⁸, characters are returned to a 'normal' temporality within the conclusion. As such, characters within these linearly encompassed multiform explorations are restricted to only briefly expanding into mutually exclusive narrative, before somehow resolving such conflict through contemporary science, pseudo science, or other magical means. Perhaps the most memorable *Star Trek* related example of this

¹⁶⁸ Including but not limited to : "Trials and Tribble-Ations." *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Dir. Jonathon West. Perf. Avery Brooks, Colm Meaney, Alexander Siddig, Terry Farrell. Paramount Pictures. 1996.

would be the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode entitled “Trials and Tribble-Ations”¹⁶⁹ in which members of the crew are transplanted into a prior episode of the original *Star Trek* series, and interact with crew members from the earlier series. To construct the story also involved a process of multiform writing, in which the canon of *Star Trek* was broken, by creating two episodes (from the two different series) retelling the same plotline, yet containing mutually excluding footage and aspects.

Multiform narrative allows the interpreter to interpret multiple, contradictory stories, and as a result form a context of narrative understanding. When these narratives do not resolve linearly, the interpreter is in a position to either accept that there are multiple outcomes, or as part of the process of linear re-contextualisation of narrative select an outcome and ignore/dismiss other possible narratives. “Human perception, however, also seems to work in the opposite direction, erasing ‘noise’ when a strong signal is present, enabling us to hear only what we perceive as meaningful and to ignore anything extraneous which intrudes”¹⁷⁰ When a linear resolution presents itself, the interpreter is often involved in a process of judging the final actions of the character in light of their possible reactions to the multiform aspects of the narrative.

Natural Habitat uses a similar technique to reinforce the multiform nature of its construction. The narrative, broken down into four distinct genre streams, contains many moments where the streams converge and discuss the same events

¹⁶⁹ “Trials and Tribble-Ations.” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Dir. Jonathon West. Perf. Avery Brooks, Colm Meaney, Alexander Siddig, Terry Farrell. Paramount Pictures. 1996.

¹⁷⁰ Douglas, J.Y., “Maps, Gaps, and Perceptions: What Hypertext Readers (Don’t) Do,” *Perforations* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1992) (n.p.). P 3.

from mutually exclusive perspectives. While these events are portrayed in distinct genres, there are many cues in the text to suggest to the reader that these events are in fact related; the purpose of this deliberate convergence of text is to encourage the reader to interpret events in their own manner. While each character relates events from their perspective, deliberate errors in description on behalf of the character or elements that do not translate from one genre to another create the impression for the reader that both characters are seeing the same events with their own unique filter. The purpose of this is twofold; firstly the reader is placed in the position to re-contextualise the narrative in support of one character over another, and secondly the reader is given insight into a potential third perspective that is only ever implied – the realist narrative that contains *Natural Habitat*.

Janet Murray and multiform narrative.

Much of the definition of multiform narrative correlates with Murray's writings on multiform story, which in turn are discussions of existing narratives that Murray has identified as multiform in nature. Initially, these discussions focus on the observed characteristics of multiform narrative, which allow for the elements of multiform to be identified. Primarily, the multiform narrative in some way transcends our current understanding of temporal and spatial relationships. Often, this can simply be a shift between perspectives, as "[m]ultiform stories often reflect different points of view of the same event"¹⁷¹, but multiform narrative can also maintain the same perspective, and instead change the laws of nature. While this element of narrative initially appears to be concerned with

¹⁷¹ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 36.

metaphysics and philosophy, Murray suggests that this is indeed the crux of multiform, and that multiform narrative is concerned with exploring the implications and restrictions of human understanding. “To be alive in the twentieth century is to be aware of the alternative possible selves, of alternative possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world.”¹⁷² In addition to exploring the development of characters or worlds across mutually exclusive events, multiform narratives can be said to be exploring the manner in which interpreters assemble narratives. Knowing that the multiform story contains aspects, be they character, plot or setting that have contradictory elements, the interpreter must still construct an overall linear context in order to interpret the narrative. “Even as they begin reading a narrative, readers are interpreting texts from the outset: integrating details, forming and developing hypotheses, modifying, confirming, and abandoning predictions.”¹⁷³

Secondly, and as a result of the primary nature of multiform narrative, Murray identifies that the interpreter is often required to accept a more active role in the reading process. When reading from the multiple streams of a multiform narrative, it is no longer simply enough for the interpreter to be aware of the conventions of the narrative, such as genre and form, but they are also being required to participate in re-assembling the narrative into a whole. “The ‘glue’ that holds texts together is the readers’ ability to perceive references and casual connections linking phrases, sentences, and paragraphs together.”¹⁷⁴ While there

¹⁷² Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 38.

¹⁷³ Douglas, J.Y., "Tell Me When to Stop: Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives," *Hypertext/Theory*. Ed. George Landow. 1994, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. P 26.

¹⁷⁴ Douglas, J.Y., "Tell Me When to Stop: Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives," *Hypertext/Theory*. Ed. George Landow. 1994, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. P 26.

is no real choice as to the progression of the narrative itself, when re-contextualising the narrative into a linear whole, the interpreter is asked to determine whether events that have occurred in a multiform fashion should be prioritised, whether characters have evolved in a comparable fashion across the breadth of the story, and in essence, to build up an overall impression of narrative from the story. This process is simplified when the story is itself contained within linear boundaries, but this too can cause problems in contextualising the narrative, because the reader is required to not only understand how the multiform nature of the narrative has been returned to linearity, but accept that the explanation is plausible. The majority of multiform narratives assume that the interpreter can conceptualise the theoretical concepts being used to create the multiform elements of narrative, be they a break from the laws of physics, or simply the retelling of events from multiple perspectives. Once the shift to a multiform structure has been made, however, the progenitor places the interpreter in a position similar to that of a detective, in that the interpreter must assemble the conflicting elements and arrive at an ‘answer’, which is the interpreter’s interpretation of the narrative whole.

These two elements are the fundamental distinguishing features of the “multiform story”¹⁷⁵, and it is by exploring these elements that Murray attempts to provide an understanding of how the form developed. “As this wide variety of multiform stories makes clear, print and motion picture stories are pushing past linear formats not out of mere playfulness but in an effort to give expression to the characteristically twentieth-century perception of life as composed of parallel

¹⁷⁵ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 30.

possibilities.”¹⁷⁶ The multiform narrative is a cultural reflection of the profound impact science and philosophies have had on modern cognitive thought. Without the formal learning provided by modern education practices, it is unlikely that our society would seemingly challenge its philosophical role in quite the same way. Indeed, just as in the past humanity has modelled its place on then-contemporary philosophical, religious and scientific thought, and has moved from such positions as the self as the centre, the family as the centre, the community as the centre, the Earth as the centre, the Solar System as the centre, and the galaxy as the centre, we now apply our accumulated knowledge in order to challenge the assumption that we can claim our very reality is central to a grand cosmological order. In part this is because we can accept that our understanding of time and space is in many ways limited, and is in itself a man-made concept. In this new metaphysical minefield of existence that we previously did not acknowledge existed, our culture now seeks to explore what might have been as well as what is, what was, and what will be. “Whether multiform narrative is a reflection of post-Einsteinian physics or of a secular society haunted by the chanciness of life or of a new sophistication in narrative thinking, its alternate versions of reality are now part of the way we think, part of the way we experience the world.”¹⁷⁷

Expanding multiform narrative.

The discussion of multiform narrative undertaken by Murray focuses primarily on the identification and classification of existing multiform narratives,

¹⁷⁶ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 38.

¹⁷⁷ Murray, J.H., *Hamlet on the holodeck : the future of narrative in cyberspace*. 1998, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 38.

rather than the manner in which they are created. What then does the process for creating multiform narratives entail? Knowing that the narrative must be considerate of multiple versions, how many characters or settings are required, and what form of mutual exclusivity is to be employed? If the narrative is focused on a single character's experience, the narrative will likely occur in a multitude of temporal and spatial settings, following the individual character's experiences, experiences which are in some way linear for the character, despite breaking the broader linearity of location or time within the established setting that the narrative occurs in. Often it is part of these narratives to explain the phenomenon that facilitates the breaking of the linearity of life, or the character that is experiencing the phenomenon is aware of the effect, but not the cause, and seeks to gain an understanding. In this instance the phenomenon of the mutually exclusive storytelling mode becomes key to creating a plot, and the character/s responses to new developments and explanations of the multiform existence are the narrative arc of the story. However, if it is rather a single plotline that is being examined within the multiform narrative, it is unlikely that the temporality and spatiality will shift beyond the norm, but rather that multiple perspectives will be employed to narrate the story. Usually these perspectives are provided by other characters, or pseudo-character narrators such as the limited perspectives provided from specific vantage points, such as a fixed position camera.

The limitations and extrapolations of these characters create stories that do more than just differ slightly however, they are fundamentally different, and often paint the actions of all other involved characters in another light. Also, depending on the overall linearity of the piece, the temporal and spatial relationships within

this type of multiform narrative may seem to break, but not because the physical rules of time and space have been broken, but rather to facilitate the retelling of events from these multiple perspectives from beginning to end in a linear fashion. Within this type of multiform narrative, there is not necessarily a break of linearity, and therefore no need for an explanation of the storytelling mode. Rather, we are encountering a narrative that is told from limited perspectives, and often the limited perspective is extrapolated into a complete narrative, or such a process is implied, and the mutual exclusivity within the story occurs when these perspectively challenged narratives conflict.

This technique is critical to the manner in which *Natural Habitat* creates moments of narrative uncertainty. By relying on the rules of each character's genre-specific setting, there are moments when characters encounter each other and neither recognises the other. One notable instance lies when the fantasy and horror characters encounter each other. The fantasy character is in a situation where he is helping to hunt down a horrific mythical beast, and when the moment comes to engage this creature he panics, and blindly fires at the creature, eyes held firmly shut. At the same time, the horror character is in a bestial state, exhausted from a vengeance-driven rampage against a mass-murder that occurred in his narrative, and is caught unawares. At no time does this allow either character to recognise the other; in the horror narrative the main character is transformed into a beast, and he does not see his assailant, just as in the fantasy narrative the main character can only see a beast, and does not recognise his friend. Each of these elements remains sound in the logic of the relevant genre, but the multiple retelling of the same events with a different contextual filter creates a genuine

uncertainty in the eyes of the reader. Questions arise regarding the physical and emotional states of the characters involved, and this uncertainty only increases if the reader is aware of the overarching realist narrative governing the work as a whole. In any event, the reader is then asked to re-create their own version of events as they re-contextualise the linearity of the story, thus using the multiform elements to encourage multiple readings based on narrative uncertainty, and encouraging the reader to engage with the text in a stronger fashion.

This process can become further complicated by the combination of both of these techniques to create a narrative that follows a character's impossible movements from the perspectives of multiple observers, and this can require further effort on the part of both the progenitor and interpreter in terms of understanding the narrative arc. This complicated form of narrative is best suited to narratives where the progenitor is interested in discussing multiple characters or an ensemble cast, and explores the paradox of established characters interacting in non-linear ways, from their own unique perspectives. An example of this in practice would be the seventh season *Star Trek: Voyager* episode entitled "Shattered"¹⁷⁸, in which a major character travels through different temporalities of the same location, interacting with various characters, causing them to have similar experiences. As the story cascades through character interactions, situations arise where multiple characters are each in mutually exclusive narrative segments. Utilising this approach relies on effective introduction of the characters and setting beforehand in order for the interpreter to appreciate the interactions and developments that occur throughout the narrative. This is also important so

¹⁷⁸ "Shattered." *Star Trek: Voyager*. Perf. Kate Mulgrew, Robert Beltran, Roxann Dawson, Robert Duncan McNeill, Robert Picardo, Tim Russ, Garrett Wang. Paramount Pictures. 2001.

that the interpreter can identify where the narrative streams begin to become mutually exclusive, which is not necessarily foreshadowed as directly as it would be in a simpler multiform narrative focusing on a single character;

In this type of dual multiform narrative there is often an overarching linearity. It then becomes possible that the characters that experience the spatial/temporal transitions may in fact be encountered linearly before they are identified within the narrative as experiencing a transition outside of spatial/temporal limitations. When this occurs the interpreter needs to be able to observe unusual or contradictory behaviour that allows them to identify such an event, for later interpretation and convergence into the interpreter's overall mental narrative reconstruction. This is similar to detective fiction, and in both cases the narrative establishes a suspicion in the mind of the interpreter that something is amiss, and that events of interest should be noted for later comparison to other retellings of the same event. "Naturally, we do not always draw inferences when we read a passage. As you might expect, people are more likely to draw inferences during reading when they have been instructed to read a passage carefully."¹⁷⁹

One of the strengths of multiform narrative lies in its ability to create additional narrative tension through uncertainty within narratives. Providing the interpreter with multiple contradictory accounts asks for a choice to be made regarding which account seems more compelling; however, there are some fictional genres that can employ such uncertainty to greater effect or with greater

¹⁷⁹ Matlin, M.W., *Cognition*. 4th ed. 1998, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. P 303.

ease than others. While many of the texts that Murray discusses are based within particular genres, there is little discussion of how generic expectations can be best met by the utilisation of multiform narrative styles. Detective fiction is readily overlooked for its use of multiform techniques, although they are employed in consideration of interpreters with different expectations. Instead, the bulk of texts identified by Murray as multiform fall under the genres of science fiction and fantasy, and for good reason, because it is these genres that can best benefit from the uncertain nature of narrative. Both science fiction and fantasy genres have many established plot elements that facilitate the spatial/temporal movement multiform narrative, and as such can readily adopt feasible (within the genre) methods of allowing the multiform narrative to unfold. Indeed, when we encounter translation through time and space we often classify such texts as science fiction or fantasy, depending on whether the means of travel was scientific or magical (beyond science) in nature¹⁸⁰, such is the hold these genres have on multiform narrative techniques. While there is not necessarily a reason for a multiform narrative to occur, and thus it is down to the motives and goals of the progenitor of the narrative, these genres have strongly established thematic conventions for exploring narrative in such a fashion. Not so with detective fiction, which infrequently allow characters to travel beyond linear time and space, but instead explores multiform narratives through the use of differing perspectives.

In detective fiction, the interpreter is usually presented with various differing accounts of the movements and actions of suspect characters, recounted

¹⁸⁰ Naturally, all such travel through time and space is beyond scientific from our perspective, but it is in the presentation of the translation that such a categorization occurs. Machines, theories and mind bending physics = science. Sharp curved knives, candles and blood sacrifices = magic.

by eye witnesses of varying credibility, knowledge, motive and divulged in order. In addition to the eye witness accounts, there is usually a narrative stream devoted to the detective character itself, which is used to reassemble mutually exclusive elements into a logical order, which may in turn be accepted or rejected by the interpreter. While some accounts may corroborate each other, the source may be suspect, just as varying accounts might not be totally contradictory, yet may contain a mutually exclusive element. It is the role of the interpreter to attempt to establish which account/s are reliable and which are fraudulent or mistaken before the (typically linear in presentation) narrative has run its course. Detective fiction relies on contradictory accounts in order to create the tension of the piece, and often while the linear narrative progresses along an expected line of crime, suspicion, deduction and capture/punishment; it is the characters and their professed observations, motives and intents that capture the attention of the interpreter. Regardless of whether the narrative is written or visual, the mutually exclusive elements create a type of narrative that is typically multiform.

The reason why detective fiction is overlooked as multiform narrative, however, lies in the expectations of the interpreter. When interpreting detective fiction, the interpreter is expecting to be misinformed via ambiguities and uncertainties, and as such does not see the multiform nature of the text because they have become actively engaged with the generic form. "When immersed in a text, reader's perceptions, reactions, and interactions all take place within the text's frame, which itself usually suggests a single schema and a few definite scripts for highly directed interaction."¹⁸¹ While science fiction and fantasy

¹⁸¹ Douglas, J.Y., "The Pleasures of Immersion and Engagement: Schemas, Scripts, and the Fifth Business." *Digital Creativity* 12 (3) 2001, (n.p.). P 156.

narratives may employ the technique to relate stories, it can be used to great effect in detective fiction. As detective fiction relies on ambiguity and uncertainty to create narrative, the narrative can embrace this function by utilising multiple perspectives to further obfuscate the narrative. If there is no uncertainty as to who has conducted the crime/s at the core of the piece, then there is little point in there being a detective on the case, and just as little point in there being an interpreter emulating the detection process by way of interpreting the narrative. While there is much pleasure to be had in second guessing the motives of a detective piece, and establishing the criminal mentally ahead of the detective, the most unsatisfying detective fictions are the ones that heavily foreshadow the outcome beforehand, and take away the tension of the mutually exclusive multiform accounts, and by extension, the detective process.

The detective character in *Natural Habitat* is presented as somewhat aberrant from this process. While still in the position of receiving contradictory and conflicting factual information, the character himself is often applying his own filter to the facts of his case. Functioning much like an unreliable narrator, this causes the reader to question both the motivations and logic of the main character, while at the same time attempting to gather the deliberately sparse factual information into some form of plausible conclusion, as is traditional in detective fiction. As the main character draws heavily from the genre archetype of the hard-boiled detective, his brutish and aggressive approach can often blind him to facts that may present themselves to the reader, while at the same time accelerating the character's actions hyperbolically in relation to the information he receives. This uncertainty regarding the validity of the detective's own approach

to the case is another attempt at multiform storytelling, in a situation where there aren't many material witnesses, and the story is focused primarily on the sensationalist actions of the main character as much as the development of the case itself.

As multiform narrative is a reflection of culturally influenced speculation regarding questions of temporality and truth, it is unsurprising that much of what occurs within multiform narrative confirms our expectations as interpreters. Equally, it is from these multiform narratives that much of what we expect in such situations becomes established. Without having ever travelled through a wormhole in time and encountering ourselves, we are in little position to challenge the assertions of existing multiform narratives, particularly when they are supported by modern spiritual, physical and psychological principles. In spite of this, interpreting multiform narrative often requires additional effort on behalf of the reader than other narrative forms. Multiform narratives that focus on twisting rules of space and time require no more than the normal suspension of belief that other science fiction and fantasy tales need, however it takes more effort on the part of the interpreter in interpreting these texts, as an additional speculative element is brought into play. Often, characters become involved in impossible encounters, and while the interpreter of the narrative makes speculations about the progression of the narrative arc as in most forms of text, now there is an additional speculative element regarding the unconventional¹⁸² repercussions of these encounters, in terms of a broader linearity that may not be even explored directly within the text itself. "People combine their information

¹⁸² Unconventional in a relative fashion, as I have already discussed the role expectation and cultural norms play in the presentation of multiform narrative aspects.

about the world with the information presented in a passage, and they draw a reasonable conclusion based on that combination.”¹⁸³ Multiform narratives that rely on multiple perspectives also require an engaged interpreter, as the uncertainty that the mutually exclusive aspects of the narrative create has to be in some way resolved. Either the interpreter chooses an interpretation that draws upon elements within these multiple perspectives to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion, or just as likely, accepts that there are some narrative elements that cannot be resolved into the whole, and as such must be taken at face value.

When confronted with narrative elements that the interpreter believes cannot be interpreted into their understanding of the work, the interpreter may in turn question the validity of the narrative as a whole: Even as many interpreters enjoy the challenge of mutually exclusive logistics within narrative, others cannot rationalise the ambiguity of an overall linear narrative, and instead prioritise achieving closure as the primary goal of the interpretive process. “Endings, in other words, either confirm or invalidate the predictions we have made about resolutions to conflicts and probably outcomes as we read stories, watch films, or speculate about the lives of others.”¹⁸⁴ In both cases, the interpreter is required to make an additional effort in order to accept and enjoy the narrative that is being presented, and it is often this effort that causes interpreters to become so involved in multiform narratives.

Given that the expectations of the interpreter play an important role in communicating the unconventional translations of linearity throughout multiform

¹⁸³ Matlin, M.W., *Cognition*. 4th ed. 1998, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. P 301.

¹⁸⁴ Douglas, J.Y., "Tell Me When to Stop: Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives," *Hypertext/Theory*. Ed. George Landow. 1994, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. P 4.

narrative, the progenitor of such narrative needs to be particularly aware of the manner in which such narratives conclude. Generally, interpreters respond negatively to narratives that do not offer a conclusion, as reaching and appreciating the ending of a piece is typically the focal point of most narrative forms. "So when we navigate through interactive narratives, we are pursuing the same sorts of goals as we do as readers of print narratives – even when we know the text will not bestow upon us the final sanction of a singular ending that either authorizes or invalidates our interpretations of the text."¹⁸⁵ Thus interpreters desire to learn what events occur to conclude a plotline, how characters' lives are resolved in the short term or the long term, and to have unexplained elements resolved in some fashion. While most modern forms offer such a conclusion, it is not necessarily so clear cut as to when and the manner in which a multiform narrative may conclude.

When encountering multiform narratives that explore linear breaks, it is common that a normal or at least uninterrupted linearity resumes at the end of the piece. However, when this is not the case, the character within the narrative is left in a limbo. This occurs when a mode of presentation is open to cyclical continuation, such as in a looping hypertext narrative, or when the narrative folds onto itself, seemingly locking the characters into an endless loop with no cessation. This in itself can be seen as an ending of a sort however, and it is accepted that characters within science fiction and fantasy in particular can be left adrift in logic-bending time loops and cause and effect related conundrums, thus meeting the desire of the interpreter to see the future of the narrative in some way

¹⁸⁵ Douglas, J.Y., "Tell Me When to Stop: Closure and Indeterminacy in Interactive Narratives," *Hypert/Text/Theory*. Ed. George Landow. 1994, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. P 40.

delineated. If there is some uncertainty to the nature of the resolution however, it is unlikely that the narrative will be well received, particularly after the additional effort on the part of the interpreter in extrapolating a potential conclusion.

Similarly, when narratives that focus on multiple perspectives conclude, there is something of an expectation that the mutually exclusive elements will either resolve back into a single linear narrative, or that the differences can be explained away as quirks of the perspective itself, or even a deliberate falsification. In the “Trials and Tribble-Ations” episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*¹⁸⁶ the crew of DS9 are restored to their own linear timeline, without having substantially influenced the past, but instead having undertaken restorative actions. When these mutually exclusive events cannot be re-integrated into a single linear narrative or be accepted as being in some way skewed at the conclusion however, the interpreter is faced with the task of choosing which narrative/s they found most believable. If they cannot make such a choice between mutually exclusive narratives, or remain open to multiple resolutions to the narrative, there is unlikely to be a satisfying conclusion for the interpreter, creating a significant hurdle to the process of narrative reconstruction that is undertaken in order for the interpreter to interpret the narrative.

Natural Habitat does retain uncertainty in its ending, but rather than intended to leave the reader hanging, this uncertainty allows for multiple endings to be constructed. On a purely linear level, if the suspension of disbelief of the reader is high enough, all four of the characters undertake something of an

¹⁸⁶ “Trials and Tribble-Ations.” *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Dir. Jonathon West. Perf. Avery Brooks, Colm Meaney, Alexander Siddig, Terry Farrell. Paramount Pictures. 1996.

unnatural journey, only to return to their own time/space in their own fashion, with the conflicting elements of the story being reduced to mere quirks of the genre-mode of storytelling employed. This reading is reinforced by elements of uncertainty in the conclusion of the narrative. The science fiction character is shown to be able to learn new languages easily, a result of his embedded technological device. The horror character remains something of an enigma, and is very careful in keeping secret his injuries and mysterious survival, even going so far as to recover a ring and watch that are likely from his own severed arm. The fantasy character is reluctant to discuss what may or may not be delusions of his travel, and is anxious to leave events behind him, possibly stemming from the murder that he believes he committed. The detective character is perhaps the most ambiguous, as he is very concerned with criminal prosecution, but was unwilling to discuss the events that had occurred.

Beyond that, there lies the possible reading that the characters never entered into their own generic worlds, but instead acted in a real world, with the diary elements and realist bookends facilitating such a reading, by providing narrative context. Other readings can also result, particularly from the hypertext version of the narrative, where the selective exclusion of pieces of the story paints characters in a different light, and either lends credence to their version of events or undermines the strength of another character's version of events.

Multiform narratives: Treatment in fiction.

Many interpreters do not identify narratives as multiform, and as such do not actively seek out multiform narratives as a form, instead encountering them within particular genres and mediums. Characteristics that academics attribute to multiform narrative, many interpreters accept as genre specific traits, such as the multiple perspectives of detective fiction, and the disrupted linear narratives of science fiction, and as a result multiform narratives can often be overlooked, absorbed as they are within readily used genre categories. Within film in particular there have been some notable multiform narratives that have been absorbed into broader genres; *Groundhog Day*¹⁸⁷ is invariably under comedy, just as *Back to the Future*¹⁸⁸ will be sitting in adventure, sci-fi, or the dreaded weekly categories of the local video store. And while mainstream hit *Sliding Doors*¹⁸⁹ will fall under the equivalent of romantic comedy, there are still significant multiform elements within each of these narratives.

*Groundhog Day*¹⁹⁰ is undoubtedly successful as a comedy, both initially in cinema release and subsequently in popularity and television replays, but it is also an excellent example of cinematic multiform narrative. The storyline follows the character development of flawed weatherman Phil Connors, played by Bill Murray, as he becomes trapped in a recurring nightmare¹⁹¹, beginning each day anew from yesterday morning, in his perspective. Despite continually waking at

¹⁸⁷ *Groundhog Day*. Dir. Harold Ramis. Perf. Bill Murray, Andie McDowell, Chris Elliot, Stephen Tobolowsky, Brian Doyle-Murray, Marita Geraghty, Angela Paton. Columbia Pictures, 1993 (motion picture).

¹⁸⁸ *Back to the Future*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1985 (motion picture).

¹⁸⁹ *Sliding Doors*. Dir. Peter Howitt. Perf. Gwyneth Paltrow, John Hannah, John Lynch, Jean Tripplehorn. Miramax Films. 1998 (motion picture).

¹⁹⁰ *Groundhog Day*. Dir. Harold Ramis. Perf. Bill Murray, Andie McDowell, Chris Elliot, Stephen Tobolowsky, Brian Doyle-Murray, Marita Geraghty, Angela Paton. Columbia Pictures, 1993 (motion picture).

¹⁹¹ Certainly as far as his character is concerned. The exact nature of Phil's recurring experience is never explained.

6.00am in Punxsutawney on February 2nd, Groundhog Day, Phil retains knowledge of his previous day, and can learn and grow from his experiences. The elements of cinematic comedy are present; we have an unwillingly displaced character with an overly critical opinion of his perverse or ironic surroundings and companions, who is willing and aptly able to express his opinion to all and sundry. This situational comedy has been employed many times, particularly in American comedy, and usually revolves around travellers who experience events beyond their expectations. Many classic examples include, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*¹⁹², *National Lampoon's European Vacation*¹⁹³, and *Funny Farm*¹⁹⁴. Unsurprisingly, many of these movies star and are written by Saturday Night Live alumni, who in turn have heavily influenced both American and worldwide comedy, although the particular, overly critical aspect of central characters tends to remain key to these late 80's comedies and early 90's.¹⁹⁵

While such comedies often go to extremes of ludicrous situations, *Groundhog Day*¹⁹⁶ is exceptional in its treatment. Rather than having a string of unlikely events building to provide comedy, the story instead focuses on what may result when a situation appears repeatedly. As Phil Connors begins each day anew, hale and hearty regardless of his actions in the previous 'day', he has room to experiment. The interpreter is in the position of the impossible observer,

¹⁹² *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. Dir. John Hughes. Perf. Steve Martin, John Candy, Michael McKean, Laila Robins. Paramount Pictures. 1987 (motion picture).

¹⁹³ *National Lampoon's European Vacation*. Dir. Amy Heckerling. Perf. Chevy Chase, Beverly D'Angelo, Dana Hill, Jason Lively. Warner Brothers. 1985 (motion picture).

¹⁹⁴ *Funny Farm*. Dir. George Roy Hill. Perf. Chevy Chase, Madolyn Smith-Osborne. Warner Brothers. 1988 (motion picture).

¹⁹⁵ Later variants typically have characters that create the comedy through their own fallibilities, rather than focusing on the fallibilities of others, such as in "Road Trip" and "Rat Race".

¹⁹⁶ *Groundhog Day*. Dir. Harold Ramis. Perf. Bill Murray, Andie McDowell, Chris Elliot, Stephen Tobolowsky, Brian Doyle-Murray, Marita Geraghty, Angela Paton. Colombia Pictures, 1993 (motion picture).

witnessing events in sequence that are mutually exclusive in nature, yet represent more than alternatives for the main character, but are instead the events of subsequent days from his perspective. This is no more evident than the sections of film that show Phil attempting to seduce characters or learn what motivates them. In one take a direct question leads to personal information, but suspicion on behalf of the questioned character. This information is then used in following recurring scenes, where that personal information allows Phil to gain a desired result. Comedic situations arise when Phil decides to better himself, such as when he takes it upon himself to learn the piano, continually bribing a local piano teacher to eject her current child protégé and instead instruct him. As Phil's unique looping condition (seen for us in a collage of recurring moments) illustrates his failings to him, and he fails to win the affections of his producer, played by Andie McDowell, despair begins to set in. However, even this despair produces humour, as Phil proceeds to commit suicide in numerous ways, each more destructive and contrived than the last, only to rise again at 6.00am. It is the alternating apathy and inventiveness of the character in these situations that causes us to find humour in a subject that is typically given a sensitive treatment, just as it is the multiform technique of narrative looping that facilitates the comedic situation.

The focus of the story remains the evolution of the character of Phil Connors, and as the multiform situation returns Phil to a beginning, so too does his attitude revolve in cycles, from depression and desperation to acceptance and development. Eventually, after acts of contrition and contribution, and coincidentally learning intimate details of the lives of everyone around him, Phil is deemed by whatever power has held him back to have become a better, well

rounded person, and is allowed an escape from his situation, a day older, but infinitely wiser. The return to normal linearity for Phil does nothing to negate the collective multiform experience he has had, and allows the interpreter to appreciate that the tale of Phil Connors has indeed come to some sort of end.

Perhaps the television program/s most responsible for introducing the mainstream interpreter to multiform narratives would have to be *Star Trek*¹⁹⁷ and the various related series. It is with some inevitability that discussion of multiform narrative returns to *Star Trek*¹⁹⁸, because it is here that much of the social and cultural exploration of matters such as temporal physics and paradox has begun. Partially due to the genre specific elements of science fiction, and no doubt partially due to the fiscal nature of hiring additional actors, the situation often arises in these series where a character meets their own double, either from a mutually exclusive timeline, a parallel timeline that has made an impossible translation, or from a potential future timeline, travelling back to carry some form of message. Treatment of these events has been in many ways conventionalized, with a parallel universe containing another Captain Kirk discovered in *Star Trek*¹⁹⁹ re-explored in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*²⁰⁰ with an additional William Riker, with this character reintroduced and an additional parallel

¹⁹⁷ *Star Trek*. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley, James Doohan, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig, George Takei. Paramount Pictures. 1966.

¹⁹⁸ *Star Trek*. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley, James Doohan, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig, George Takei. Paramount Pictures. 1966.

¹⁹⁹ *Star Trek*. Perf. William Shatner, Leonard Nimoy, DeForest Kelley, James Doohan, Nichelle Nichols, Walter Koenig, George Takei. Paramount Pictures. 1966.

²⁰⁰ *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, Michael Dorn, Gates McFadden, Marina Sirtis, LeVar Burton, Brent Spiner. Paramount Pictures. 1987.

ensemble cast created for *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*²⁰¹ and *Star Trek: Voyager*²⁰².

In addition to these parallel characters, timelines are often disrupted or explored simultaneously, such as in the finale of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*²⁰³, “All Good Things...”, where a dislocated Captain Picard finds himself interacting in three timelines in succession, and is required to organize a non-linear confluence of Enterprise D/E ships in a particular spatial location in order to prevent a galactic calamity. Multiform narratives are so often used in these series that the plot device of ‘Q’ was created, seemingly specifically to explain such events in a rapid and efficient manner. Standing in for a personified divine will and judge, ‘Q’, played by John de Lancie, has since his creation personally facilitated a wake of multiform narratives within nearly every episode he has starred in. Another perhaps self-mocking creation of the Star Trek universe would be the ‘Office of Temporal Affairs’, an organization devoted not to maintaining the linear future (such as in *Timecop*²⁰⁴), but rather to recording the many multiform events that occur, and in some cases guiding the overall continuity between these events.²⁰⁵ It is certainly within these narratives that a significant treatment of multiform situations has occurred, and while the science

²⁰¹ *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Dir. Jonathon West. Perf. Avery Brooks, Colm Meaney, Alexander Siddig, Terry Farrell. Paramount Pictures, 1993.

²⁰² *Star Trek: Voyager*. Perf. Kate Mulgrew, Robert Beltran, Roxann Dawson, Robert Duncan McNeill, Robert Picardo, Tim Russ, Garrett Wang. Paramount Pictures. 1995

²⁰³ “All Good Things...” *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Jonathan Frakes, Michael Dorn, Gates McFadden, Marina Sirtis, LeVar Burton, Brent Spiner. Paramount Pictures. 1994.

²⁰⁴ *Timecop*. Dir. Peter Hyams. Perf. Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mia Sara, Ron Silver, Bruce McGill. Universal Pictures. 1994 (motion picture).

²⁰⁵ It is also humorous that this particular organization holds Captains James T. Kirk, Jean Luc Picard and Catherine Janeway in ill repute, for their numerous breaks to the linearity of time.

may or may not be accurate using current theoretical approaches, it is certainly from here that much of the layman's logic of time and space has been drawn.

Natural Habitat relies heavily on pre-existing concepts of time travel, life, death and unreliable perspectives to reinforce the understanding that it is a multiform work. The science fiction character is presented as someone who travels both forwards and backwards in time, and much of the treatment of both this transition and the reaction the character has to these events is drawn from existing science fiction on similar topics. The notion of time operating in a cyclical fashion is troublesome, but has been explored in contemporary fiction on the topic, and at the very least the manner in which the character moves likely does not break too many existing conventions on the topic. The fantasy character is placed in a situation where he has either travelled to a distant and disconnected land, or has hallucinated such an event, and the uncertainty of his story explores the character's own uncertainty regarding where he is and what he believes he should be doing. The detective character is never shown as having made any transition to his generic world; rather, he shifts to his own gritty, noir-influenced world only when events are discussed from his own point of view. This raises the question of whether or not this character ever indeed leaves the 'real' world, or if he rather applies a veneer of noir to events that are occurring around him. Finally, the horror character is perhaps the only character capable of willingly travelling between what could be called 'his world' of horror genre conventions and the 'real world', but at the same time to do so he is transformed into an impossible beast that, as current understanding and mythology would reinforce, does not exist in the 'real world'. These transitions of time and space exist in contemporary

works, and there are conventions of storytelling that are necessary for the reader to accept them; popular treatments of time and space translocation, and the uncertainty of sanity and perspective serve as a basis for these elements in *Natural Habitat*.

Another popular and seminal narrative exploring the implications of multiform travel, the *Back to the Future*²⁰⁶ series has also created several narrative conventions to explain how the operation of time and space may be treated. This series has introduced the idea of a limited echo or residual memory, wherein a character that is seen to be an impossible creation of a current timeline is given a temporary extended life, in order to repair potential damage to an event. In conventional experience, when an event occurs there is finality to the results, certainly from the perspectives of the individuals influenced, however this narrative device allows for the telling of stories that are impossible as far as we understand cause and effect.

This is a fairly uncommon multiform technique, as it is seemingly contradicted by generally accepted theoretical understandings of time, yet it does allow for interesting narratives, where characters are pitted against a misdirected fate, and are running up against a clock of inevitability, in which the actions that have created this divergence become truly and finally mutually exclusive. Secondly, this series popularized the notion of avoiding oneself in another timeline, hypothesizing that it could lead to the instant and irrevocable destruction of the galaxy. While this particular prescription and its resulting catastrophe

²⁰⁶ *Back to the Future*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1985 (motion picture).

seems somewhat hyperbolic in nature, and is in fact contradicted several times within the series itself²⁰⁷, it has created the expectation that encounters between mutually exclusive characters should be avoided at best. This is supported by the Star Trek canon, which also states that such events should be avoided as much as possible, in order to retain the purity of the potential future timeline²⁰⁸. Other popular shows such as *Stargate: SG1*²⁰⁹ have explored this situation, with messages being sent through time on no less than two occasions, both of which have averted a potential disaster but have resulted in the original timeline to cease, and restore a new linearity to the series.

Natural Habitat plays with the expectation that meetings of characters that should not meet carries a negative connotation. The few times that characters do meet they are either unaware of the influences they are having on each other, unaware of the other character until too late to interact with them, or even unable to recognize each other as a result of genre-specific elements of their stories. This standing tradition in multiform narratives of particular genres, less so detective fiction than the others given the emphasis on realist settings and events, enhances the narrative tension for a reader following multiple characters through their streams of narrative.

²⁰⁷ Such as when 1985 Doc Brown meets 1955 Doc Brown, or 1985 Jennifer meets future Jennifer, neither event causing the film to burst from the VCR/DVD player, or at least to fade to black with a quiet whump of a galaxy collapsing into its own navel.

²⁰⁸ Again, this particular rule is broken readily, and often the narrative relies on a character having impossible knowledge in order for it to continue. Presumably to avoid lazy writing, such events are seen as negative, certainly within the narrative universes in which they occur.

²⁰⁹ *Stargate: SG1*. Perf. Richard Dean Anderson, Amanda Tapping, Michael Shanks, Christopher Judge. MGM Worldwide Television Productions Incorporated. 1997.

Another narrative development in temporal physics has been the use of the sun as an enabler of time translation. While *Back to the Future*²¹⁰ relied on an unlikely use of a flux capacitor²¹¹, a relatively common narrative device would be Sol, our sun itself. Whether it is a slingshot manoeuvre at maximum warp, or an open wormhole fired at the time of a solar flare, the sun is seen as the narrative solution to enabling temporal/spatial dislocations. This is in some ways symbolic, as the vast amount of energy at the centre of our solar system has perpetually been seen as something representing divine will, impossible strength and longevity.

Whether it is because the sun has an influence on magnetic fields, which have in turn been speculatively linked to space and time, or whether it is the relative permanence of Sol and its place in the big scheme of things that allows travellers in time to find a spatial placeholder, much as navigators of old used stars, the sun has become the oft used time travelling narrative device, a symbolic and scientific enabler. The sun stands as the driving element behind the time-travelling technology used in *Natural Habitat* also, where the science fiction character is absorbed into amber or ruby devices, representing the stages of the sun's life cycle, and facilitating travel between these stages of the sun.

Not all explorations of multiform techniques in film have been reliant on science fiction, and it has in fact become increasingly common to encounter multiform in a variety of genres. Films such as *Sliding Doors*²¹², *Peggy Sue Got*

²¹⁰ *Back to the Future*. Dir. Robert Zemeckis. Perf. Michael J. Fox, Christopher Lloyd, Lea Thompson. Amblin Entertainment, 1985 (motion picture).

²¹¹ Which when powered by an equally unlikely 1.21 gigawatt lightning strike enabled temporal travel.

²¹² *Sliding Doors*. Dir. Peter Howitt. Perf. Gwyneth Paltrow, John Hannah, John Lynch, Jean Tripplehorn. Miramax Films. 1998 (motion picture).

*Married*²¹³, *Mr. Destiny*²¹⁴ and *The Family Man*²¹⁵ present multiform comedy, relying on tales that explore potential alternative scenarios, something that was previously the domain of the printed mainstream comic. The exploration of speculative fiction allows for efficient Hollywood storytelling, facilitating a concise picture of character growth that can work beyond traditional plot linearity, and cover a broad range of time and situations to highlight the changes that occur. In terms of emphasis, multiform narrative in these cases is a powerful tool, allowing directors and writers to rapidly transition characters between all and nothing, creating juxtaposed images difficult to realistically create in linear narrative. These narratives often appear shallow in comparison to other multiform narratives, as they generally offer two clear cut and distinct alternatives, arising from a particular choice or moment, simplifying the paradoxical nature of the main protagonist's experience for the interpreter in order to reduce the distraction that can occur in more complex multiform fictions.

A film worth considering is *Memento*²¹⁶, which follows the actions of Leonard Shelby, played by Guy Pearce, as he attempts to move through his world, which is complicated by his amnesiac condition. The narrative in *Memento*²¹⁷ can be reconstructed to create a linear whole, uninterrupted and seamless; however this is not how the interpreter is presented with the narrative. Leonard's actions are influenced by tattoos on his body and Polaroid images he has taken. The film

²¹³ *Peggy Sue Got Married*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Kathleen Turner, Nicholas Cage, Barry Miller, Catherine Hicks, Joan Allen. Tri Star Pictures. 1986 (motion picture).

²¹⁴ *Mr. Destiny*. Dir. James Orr. Perf. James Belushi, Linda Hamilton, Michael Caine, Jon Lovitz. Touchstone Pictures. 1990 (motion picture).

²¹⁵ *The Family Man*. Dir. Brett Ratner. Perf. Nicholas Cage, Téa Leone, Don Cheadle, Jeremy Piven. Saturn Films. 2000 (motion picture).

²¹⁶ *Memento*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Jorja Fox. Newmarket Capital Group LLC. 2000 (motion picture).

²¹⁷ *Memento*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Jorja Fox. Newmarket Capital Group LLC. 2000 (motion picture).

begins at the end, with a murder, and the story is told through a series of flashbacks moving further back in time, tracing a history back to the genesis of this narrative. When interpreting this narrative, the interpreter is in the situation of knowing the future, but having to learn the past, and it is this narrative technique which closely recreates the uncertainty of multiform.

Traditional narrative could be said to have an observable linear organisation underpinning it. As new forms of narrative have evolved, and new mediums have been explored, innovative approaches to narrative organisation and linear progression have been added to the collective pool of techniques available to progenitors of narrative. Rarely do these new techniques arrive as a result of the new mode of storytelling, but rather the strengths of such a new mode allows for further innovation of a previously explored concept. Consider the technique of flashback, in which the linearity of narrative is broken temporally in order to facilitate the overall narrative progression, often by providing time-critical information when it can be delivered for maximum suspense/tension, as opposed to beginning with the information, and undermining a moment of conflict within the narrative. The technique of flashback cannot be said to belong solely to film, as the novel, play, poem and myth have all used the technique to varying degrees, yet it is in film that flashback works most effectively; the filmmaker using a flashback can indicate the change in temporality by auditory cues, visual cues such as a simple rippled fade motion, can piece in the segment of memory sequence almost seamlessly, and then return to the current temporality of the narrative, rarely having to be concerned they will lose the audience in the process.

In part, this arises because as interpreters of filmic narrative, we are continuously assembling pieces of cut information into a running linear story, changing from shot to shot and scene to scene, and yet maintaining a context for understanding the overall progression of the narrative. In fact, by its very nature film requires us to piece together tiny slivers of information, cells and milliseconds of audio and visual information into a seamless whole, hopefully ignoring the seams in the narrative as we do so. In the novel, we are less accustomed to substantially disrupting temporal progression, and it can be unexpected to repeatedly make such movements without using a medium code to indicate such a transition, such as an obvious change in date and location, character age and characteristics, and perhaps even an introduction explaining such a transition. Literary narrative of course employs flashbacks, and has done for many years, as well as forward movements in time, but these events can all be rearranged in the interpretive process in a linear fashion.

Most multiform works rely on creating uncertainty in the interpreter, by introducing additional elements to narrative that influence the linear progression of a story, and it is then the role of the interpreter to navigate the uncertain elements of the text to create (or fail to create) an interpretation. This is not directly the case with *Memento*²¹⁸ however, as there is no mutually exclusive element to the film. In its place there is instead a pseudo exclusive state, where the interpreter compares the factual future events of the film to a speculative (created by the interpretive process) prior time, and then encounters facts which dispel or confirm these speculations. The film does in fact progress through story elements

²¹⁸ *Memento*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Jorja Fox. Newmarket Capital Group LLC. 2000 (motion picture).

from multiple positions that the ordinary interpreter cannot adopt, yet without an actual paradox, but rather an illusion of one that is created through a clever storytelling structure. The story relies on the interpreter to create the paradox through the interpretive process, by relying on the knowledge that narrative is reconstructed through linear time in the interpretive process, and providing the end result, the interpreter is building the beginning of the story, and it is this version of the story that then comes into conflict with the next segment of filmic story, presented out of sequence as it is.

The interpreter is encouraged to undertake this task through the presentation of the film as well; the protagonist is portrayed as a sympathetic character, and through intimate film moments the interpreter is encouraged to sympathise and empathise with the position Leonard finds himself in. Both Leonard and the interpreter are unable to fill the story leading up to Leonard's current on screen situation, and by witnessing Leonard's internal pain and external abuse from those around him, the interpreter attempts to reconstruct the narrative. It is only by understanding the origins of Leonard that the interpreter can determine if, in their own assessment, he is a character worthy of praise or damnation. It is the interpreter of the backwards linear segments that creates the 'alternate' storyline, and by extension the pseudo multiform state, rather than the film itself, which provides a linear narrative in a reversed hierarchical structure of linearity.

Criticisms of multiform narrative.

There are negative elements to multiform narratives, and their use as an analytical and creative tool. The diffused narrative focus within some multiform narratives creates a situation that provides a large amount of information to the interpreter, information which in turn may not necessarily be relevant or correctly²¹⁹ interpreted. When this situation arises, the interpreter is likely to find they encounter distractions in the text that impair the interpretive process. Whether it is the overflow of information, or the divergence from the simpler linear forms traditionally encountered, the interpreter who is inexperienced or ill equipped to interpret multiform narratives can easily be lost to the progenitor and their message. This situation becomes more of a problem when encountered in mediums where the interpreter has choice regarding the exposition of the narrative, such as in video games and hypermedia. The potential for the interpreter to discover information out of sequence or immaterial to the narrative the interpreter was focusing on becomes more evident in these works, where actions of the interpreter can in fact influence the progression of the narrative, and indeed in limited circumstances the creation of narrative.

Another area in which the interpreter may encounter difficulty in interpreting a multiform narrative lies in the nature of fiction itself, the unreliable narrator. We commonly encounter a narrator that we believe is deceiving us, is self serving or evasive, and is in effect censoring a narrative to promote a particular perspective. Often it is this misdirection that creates the tone of the narrative and the character of the narrator. When encountered in mutually

²¹⁹ Correct in this instance refers not to the desires of the progenitor of the text, but rather the idea that the receiver can in fact mistake multiform elements of text for traditional narrative elements, and as such would misinterpret information because they have not realised the interpretive key for the text is unconventional.

exclusive elements of multiform narrative however, particular narratives relying on multiple unreliable narrators, the narrative can become difficult for the interpreter to fully engage with. *Solaris*²²⁰ for example works hard to undermine the reliability of all potential narrators within the film, whilst at the same time requiring the interpreter to engage with these potential narrator characters in order to arrive at any form of conclusive ending, which the film itself only somewhat ambiguously alludes to. With multiple false versions of a narrative, the interpreter is being asked to choose from narratives and narrators that may all be unappealing because of their various foibles, and in effect may dismiss the narrative as a whole, because they do not believe that they can find a truth in the collaborative lies. “These mental preferences for the story’s outcome can be so strong that they can actually interfere with readers’ ability to judge how the story actually turned out, making us pause as we try to decide whether that unhappy ending really did occur.”²²¹ In traditional narrative, an unreliable narrator can be compensated for, and as such does not impair the interpretation process. When encountered in numbers however, the uncertainty created by multiple unreliable narrators can render a narrative to register false for an interpreter, disrupting the interpretive process by causing them to doubt all elements of varying accounts within the text.

In order to create multiform narratives, the progenitor is in most cases going to need to carefully consider the structure of the text. This creates additional situations where unintentionally contradictory information appears within a text, and as such can cause the editing process to become more difficult. However, there also is an issue regarding the concept of the multiform narrative; what

²²⁰ *Solaris*. Dir. Stephen Soderbergh. Perf. George Clooney, Natascha McElhone, Viola Davis, Jeremy Davies. 20th Century Fox. 2002 (motion picture).

²²¹ Matlin, M.W., *Cognition*. 4th ed. 1998, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston. P 305.

constitutes multiform? In film, it is common to encounter a cut that shows brief flashbacks from impossible perspectives, multiple angles of scenes that may intentionally (through the use of stylistics such as in *Solaris*²²²) or accidentally (through retakes of scenes) contradict one another in some key way, and other divergences from a linear nature that might technically construct a multiform narrative, whilst not intending to do so, such as in *Memento*²²³. In novels, it is common to follow multiple perspectives of major characters, and these events too can become contradictory in nature, but it is not necessarily the intent of the progenitor to create or utilise multiform technique. In essence, this problem arises when the techniques of narrative produce mutually exclusive events which in turn create technical multiforms, when in actuality the spirit of the multiform text is not present, the progenitor is not interested in exploring such themes, and the narrative has instead been unintentionally polluted by the techniques of multiform works.

How does multiform apply to hypertext?

Multiform narratives can be created using techniques that are medium specific and rely on the coded language of interpretation specific to a particular genre of form, such as the implied observer differences conveyed in camera angles, and the change in narrative tone and expression carried in novels. Hypertext and hypermedia multiform narratives are interesting, because they can employ a combination of borrowed techniques to create multiform, as well as

²²² *Solaris*. Dir. Stephen Soderbergh. Perf. George Clooney, Natascha McElhone, Viola Davis, Jeremy Davies. 20th Century Fox. 2002 (motion picture).

²²³ *Memento*. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Guy Pearce, Carrie-Anne Moss, Joe Pantoliano, Jorja Fox. Newmarket Capital Group LLC. 2000 (motion picture).

utilising the effective fashion in which hypermedia can explore multithreaded narrative through the database-like information retrieval systems of a computerised text. “Digital visual media can best be understood through the ways in which they honour, rival, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television and print. No medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces.”²²⁴ Visually oriented hypermedia can employ visual codes similar to those used in film, and as such can create the implied camera perspectives of multiple characters within a scene, or can replay visual footage that changes over time to reflect a multiform narrative for example. While hypertext itself rarely relies on such a purely visual representation, it too can be employed to visually underline the separation of narrative segments into multiple perspectives, create visual identifies to indicate to an interpreter that an event can be explored within text from another perspective, or use stylistics to provide temporal/spatial information potentially not carried within the text itself. “Unlike a perspective painting or three-dimensional computer graphic, this windowed interface does not attempt to unify the space around any one point of view. Instead, each text window defines its own verbal, each graphic window its own visual, point of view.”²²⁵ Both hypertext and hypermedia can utilise the decision-tree style of narrative, where choices²²⁶ made by the interpreter in progressing through the narrative can facilitate reading

²²⁴ Bolter, J.D. and R. Grusin, *Remediation : understanding new media*. 1999, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 15.

²²⁵ Bolter, J.D. and R. Grusin, *Remediation : understanding new media*. 1999, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. P 33.

²²⁶ This is not automatically an empowering term, as will be discussed later, because in many instances the choice has already been made for the receiver of the text, where the progenitor has mapped out exactly how the narrative will progress as the result of any receiver choice made.

multiform narratives, in particular by re-exploring a piece of text through a mutually exclusive perspective. “It is no accident that the computer can serve as an outline processor. The machine is designed to create and track such formal structures, which are important for all its various uses.”²²⁷ “A writer could therefore maintain three outlines, each of which deployed the same topics in a different order. These outlines may all reside in the computer’s memory at the same time, each activated at the writer’s request.”²²⁸ Hypertext (more-so than hypermedia) can also employ traditional literary techniques of exploring multiform narratives, focusing on shifts through temporality and spatiality that can become too complex to easily and repeatedly explore within film and traditional text oriented works. Audio can be introduced, played concurrently against visual or textual information that can create mutually exclusive perspectives, for example reading a direct quote from a speech and hearing an auditory version of how that speech was actually presented, with marked differences.

The utilisation of auditory information is more often associated with hypermedia works, often due to the manner in which these works are presented to an audience, where size and speed can become a factor. Using current technology, it is uncommon to encounter large hypermedia that are presented across terrestrial internet lines, but are instead contained within CD/DVD technology. This is almost the direct opposite of hypertext documents, which are typically low on size due to the compression of information contained in text, and are therefore

²²⁷ Bolter, J.D., *Writing space : the computer, hypertext, and the history of writing*. 1991, Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates. P 19.

²²⁸ Bolter, J.D., *Writing space : the computer, hypertext, and the history of writing*. 1991, Hillsdale, N.J: L. Erlbaum Associates. P 21.

presented across the internet rather than on discs. While this limitation of technology does not absolutely dictate the content of hypertext and hypermedia, it is uncommon to find hypertexts that utilise a large amount of auditory and visual information that are not presented offline exclusively. Essentially then, hypertext and hypermedia can utilise borrowed techniques from a variety of forms, in addition to their own form specific tools of narrative structure that are largely enabled by the information retrieval aspects of computer technology. "Perhaps most strikingly, hypertext can show us that context is everything."²²⁹ When combined with the technical requirements of structured layouts for segmented works of multiform narratives, it can be seen that it is the organisational hierarchy of hypertext/media fictions that best enables these narratives.

Hypertext is also effective at creating the illusion of choice for the interpreter, where there is typically a level of interaction with a work required in order for the interpreter to progress through the piece. This interaction can be implemented in such a way as to encourage the interpreter to engage with the piece as a whole, as well as the segment of narrative in particular. In addition to this illusion of choice, having a navigation tool that mimics aspects of the narrative, and requires the interpreter to adopt different navigation methods for differing, mutually exclusive narrative lines creates a sense of involvement and engagement for the interpreter. It is here that the progenitor can create a blank space for the interpreter to adopt and personify/relate to when interpreting narrative, while at the same time emphasising the different aspects of a multiform narrative, such as with the stylistic differences that occur in *Natural Habitat*.

²²⁹ Douglas, J.Y., "Abandoning the Either/Or for the And/And/And: Hypertext and the Art of Argumentative Writing," *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 19.4. P 8.

Natural Habitat utilises a combination of hypertext and hypermedia techniques, and while the primary focus of the work is the interaction of genre text with multiform narrative, there is some utilisation of visual and auditory information, in order to emphasise the medium specific strengths of computerised narrative and multiform. The structure has been oriented around five main narratives, which are then presented to the interpreter through discreet blocks of text on visually stylised (and genre-coded) pages. The interpreter is presented with a segment of genre specific text from one of the four main genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror and detective fiction, and is then given an appropriate diary entry for the particular segment that is directly related to the real-world equivalent actions contained within the genre-text, maintaining the duality of character that occurs within the multiform text, as well as providing character insight, temporality and spatial relationships between characters. The multiform technique of having characters existing within a real world whilst similarly acting in a perceived/observed genre world utilises traditional literary techniques for discussing multiform narrative.

Similarly, mutually exclusive versions of events receive a literary treatment, such as when two characters are involved in an interaction, and each perceives the situation in a personal, genre specific manner. In order to highlight the differences between these genres, characters and narrative streams, the visual information of the hypertext pages is codified to not only visually demonstrate the genre that each character is exploring, but also personality aspects of the character. Auditory information is used to create setting and mood for these

characters, in particular when utilising the navigation tool of *Natural Habitat*, and while this does not create any particular multiform element directly, it does reinforce the separation of reality and genre-based experience for the characters of the story.

Despite the relative obscurity of the term, multiform narratives have been demonstrated to be both pervasive and popular. Existing across many different mediums, they embrace a variety of different genres and structures. Multiform elements can provide tension to the pacing of a narrative, as well as allow the progenitor to explore aspects of characters that are not easily possible under the restrictions of realism. While specific genres lend their strengths to multiform narratives, providing plausible reasons for creating paradox and mistrust in events and characters, genres that embrace the supernatural/pseudo-science approach to time and place, and genres that explore the contradictory nature of multiple accounts and unreliable narrators are particularly well suited. What then is the best manner of exploring these multiform works? How can the elements of structure, genre, and multiform narrative be best combined, and in what medium?

CHAPTER 5: HYPERTEXT, ART AND WRITING

What is hypertext?

When discussing hypertext previously, only broad semantics have been employed. This section focuses on the specifics of hypertext, and as such requires that a more rigid definition is produced. Colloquially speaking²³⁰, hypertext refers to a document written in the design specifications of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) or one of its contemporaries, which is then processed by a program to render a particular layout and linking association on top of a base text, most commonly in web browsers. Hypermedia is an extension of this, and refers to HTML that includes images, audio, and programming objects such as flash media. HTML is not considered to be a discreet programming language, and instead serves as an interpretive key for a specific reader program. It is also important to note that many derivative and similar markup languages fall under the catchall of hypertext, not just HTML.

Hypermedia in common vernacular is often intrinsically included under the term hypertext, and is primarily used in theoretical distinction, despite the technical differences in content between the two terms. Regarding the origin of the word, the hyper takes its meaning from the Greek prefix for over or beyond, implying that hypertext is something of a revolution and expansion from traditional texts, regardless of their form. In support of this idea, there is often

²³⁰ This stance is based on current technical requirements for hypertext, rather than the original formative efforts to define the concept. Hypertext as used today heavily implies a medium capable of rendering HTML-derivative language, and is not automatically inclusive of other texts using non-digital mediums but other elements of hypertext work.

focus on the manner in which hypertext can create hyperlinks, word associations that facilitate fast movement across a document between designated points set by the author of that document. The first defining element of hypertext stands as the hyperlink, which refers to the manner in which the document can rapidly change from one section of text to another via use of a pre-written hot-spot.

Hypertext is often used interchangeably with HTML, although HTML is the language used to produce the document, and hypertext is the resulting document. Common usage relates hypertext more specifically to the World Wide Web, and indeed this is the most prevalent body of hypertext works in existence currently. It is important to note however that hypertext functions independently of the world wide web, and can indeed be used as a local file on a computer, stored on portable media, or even rendered on smaller portable devices such as hand held palm pilots and personal data assistants.

For a reader, hypertext carries the implication that the document they read will include elements such as segmented text, images, sound, and flash elements, and is usually encountered on the world wide web (and by extension, on some variety of computer screen), although can also be part of an internal work structure as well. For an author, hypertext is a language that allows text to be adapted to an online medium, as well as embellished with graphics, audio and flash objects, while also facilitating rapid linking between sections of the document, which can be used to achieve a variety of effects.

For this exegesis, hypertext represents a medium that is displayed electronically, and that is able to leverage auditory and visual elements (as seen in hypermedia) in addition to narrative elements. Hypertext in this exegesis represents a narrative text that is able to be segmented, create one-to-many and many-to-one relationships and facilitate the navigation of same in the medium itself, can be cyclical or self referential in nature, and is able to be read on conventional electronic devices by way of an interpretive program (web browser). Hypertext as referenced in this exegesis is built from HTML (although other languages of a similar yet derivative nature are included), and is intended to be viewed exclusively on a conventional digital reading device (PC, portable web technology, web enabled phone, etc).

For this exegesis, hypertext is primarily a display medium, and is referred to as such. It is treated as a tool that enables a presentation of both text and other elements (thus blanketing hypermedia), can be presented either on the internet or on a stored local media, and is intended to be viewed on a computer screen. As used herein, it does not specifically and exclusively refer to HTML, nor any other singular markup language. It does not limit itself exclusively to a single computing platform or a single rendering program, and is intended to be as broadly functional as possible. It contains elements of work that allow it to differ in some way from a fundamental printed text, and therefore does not include merely a re-printing of a printed text without somehow altering the manner in which that text is displayed, created, and interacted with.

It is important to note that hypertext is in a state of flux, more fluid than perhaps other forms of text today. As such, it has undergone and is continuing to experience evolution and development at a fairly rapid pace. Hypertext is considered to have been originally conceived in the words of Vannevar Bush in his article “As We May Think”²³¹. This is where he first discussed a device he called the “memex”²³², a system that included functionality similar to hyperlinks, but that was not exclusively text-based. From there, the practicality of such an idea was tested in the development of hypertext systems concurrently by Ted Nelson and Douglas Engelbart. The terminology of “hypertext”²³³ and “hypermedia”²³⁴ was introduced by Nelson, and has remained in use since then.

Originally, hypertext was purely text oriented, and focused specifically on creating hyper-linking functionality. As the prevalence of home computing increased, technologies such as HyperCard were introduced to the consumer market. With the introduction of an open world wide web, first as a scientific tool and then as a tool for the general public, variations on HTML became the de-facto standard in information communication. As bandwidth, processing power, and technological literacy all increased, hypertext came to include new media, and new styles of presentation. In quick succession, hypertext was expanded to include images, audio, flash and java programming, and now blogging²³⁵.

²³¹ Bush, V., “*As we may think*”. Volume 176, July 1945: Atlantic Monthly. P 101-108.

²³² Bush, V., “*As we may think*”. Volume 176, July 1945: Atlantic Monthly. P 101-108.

²³³ Nelson, T. H., “Complex information processing: a file structure for the complex, the changing and the indeterminate.” from *ACM/CSC-ER Proceedings of the 1965 20th national conference*. (September 1965).

²³⁴ Nelson, T. H., “Complex information processing: a file structure for the complex, the changing and the indeterminate.” from *ACM/CSC-ER Proceedings of the 1965 20th national conference*. (September 1965).

²³⁵ Or web logging, if you prefer; refers to the idea of maintaining something of a personal diary that can be shared across as user-base.

Today, it is quite common for home users to create all elements of a personal webpage, and there are even new emerging technologies that provide partially constructed hypertext designs for rapid alteration with a lower barrier to entry, such as Myspace and Livejournal, focusing specifically on the web log (blog). Given the rapid development of this technology, the limitations of hypertext are often artificially enforced by several standards groups that control the accepted usage of common techniques, as well as by the limitations and quirks of the browser technologies that render hypertext works. It is conceivable however that hypertext could continue to evolve at a rapid pace, which necessitates the delineation of what is and isn't currently considered to be hypertext.

Theorising hypertext.

It could be argued that all modern media go through a series of interpretations, with the most likely encountered being converting the input into computer code. Novels are digitized into abstract binary language, film frames undergo a similar process, but while these elements are broken down into a computer-legible language, the end result is to recreate them as authentically as possible in the new medium. "Information is impersonal and imperceptible, knowledge stripped of its context in order to be transformed into digital data."²³⁶, but once digitized, is given a new context as it is reassembled. A paragraph of text before placed into a computer will largely resemble a paragraph of text that is

²³⁶ Morse, M., *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture*. 1998, Indianapolis: Indiana UP. P 3-35.

displayed on a screen, just as a shot of film will be comparable to a digital image produced from that film.

When working with hypertext however, there is not necessarily a 'true source' of material, instead the processing is done in the composition of the piece. "In the electronic medium several layers of sophisticated technology must intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text. There are so many levels of deferral that the reader or writer is hard put to identify the text at all: is it on the screen, in the transistor memory, or on the disk?"²³⁷ While semantically speaking producing a piece of hypertext from a digital image and prewritten text sounds identical to converting either of these elements individually to be understood by a computer, hypertext requires an additional layer of interpretation to be undertaken. No longer is it enough to simply reproduce the image as is, or maintain the formatting of the text, these elements need to be manipulated to produce a new resulting work. Text becomes segmented to fit a layout or design; images are altered or combined to produce new work. These manipulations can be done for film and printed text too of course, but in the case of hypertext this additional layer of interpretation is all but a requirement. Further complicating this process by including more and more elements such as audio and flash ensures that the composition of hypertext becomes a task that requires some forethought and care if the end result is to be visually and aesthetically appealing to the reader, as well as easier to navigate.

²³⁷ Bolter, J.D., "The Computer as a New Writing Space" from *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext and the History of Writing*. 1991, Hillsdale: Elinbaum and Associates. P 43.

Whereas the composition or formatting of the printed word or digital image is something of an afterthought, as much guided by concessions to personal taste as it is anything else, hypertext is governed stringently by mechanical limitations that further complicate this process. Each web browser renders hypertext differently, forcing the author to compromise further their vision of their work, compensating for technical flaws in these programs. Indeed, unlike most media, the resulting hypertext can vary widely as rendered by different web browsers. Unlike film or the novel, where the DVD given to one viewer is almost identical to the DVD given to another²³⁸, and a book held in one hand is the same when held in another, hypertext does not have the same permanence. This occurs because the composition of hypertext is not a precise or rigid thing, and is in fact an additional interpretation undertaken by the machine rendering the work based on its own limitations. This process is again compounded by personal choices made on behalf of the reader when viewing hypertext. Readers of hypertext, unlike those of the novel or film, can directly influence how their web browser renders a work, intentionally or otherwise, by selecting to view larger fonts and choosing which elements the web browser can and cannot render.

By exercising these choices, a reader can drastically alter how a piece of hypertext is displayed, and can even deliberately and consciously ‘break through’ the careful construction of a page to view the individual components manually. Furthermore, the difference here is not simply one of choosing a different

²³⁸ This of course requires that a certain concession is given to the inexact nature of mechanical reproduction, but remains fundamentally true.

size/type of display for a film²³⁹, but rather the ability to consciously choose to ignore part of the work, or to view the components in isolation rather than composition. It would not be fair to assume that since one reader is enabled in this fashion that all readers are however, as engaging with a work in such a piecemeal fashion is not the standard practice; if an operation is not supported by the browser or the interface, the majority of users will not attempt it. Likewise, while hypertext authors need to be aware of the relative transparency of their work, particularly if employing code to obfuscate the path of the story or conceal key events, the expectation is that readers will engage with the hypertext interface rather than work outside of it.

Finally, hypertext does not strictly enforce linearity as its chief mode of narrative progression. This statement does not in any way suggest that hypertext bends the laws of time and physics, (or that other mediums of narrative are restricted purely to linear progression) but rather that it supports a strong network of interconnected texts that can be progressed through much like any other decision-tree based narrative progressions, with one proviso; hypertext can and does seamlessly connect the beginning and end of these pieces into a complete whole. "Regardless of whether the process of following the chosen narrative is easy or incredibly difficult, readers of interactive narratives can coherently experience these texts in a variety of different orders and sequences without doing violence to the narratives, stories and meaning of the hypertext as a whole."²⁴⁰

While pedantically speaking you can read a novel from back to front, or view an

²³⁹ Arguably, a projector is producing a different film to a CRT display, different again to an LCD or Plasma display, but the end result is still a film that shows similar shots and colours, albeit with possibly different aspect ratios.

²⁴⁰ Douglas, J.Y., "Maps, Gaps, and Perceptions: What Hypertext Readers (Don't) Do," from *Perforations* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1992). (n.p.). P 13.

entire film in reverse, this is a mechanical perversion of the intended order. Much of the meaning of the work is conveyed in the linear presentation, and by breaking that the reader can produce an avant-garde reading perhaps, but not one necessarily intended by the author. Furthermore, with DVDs and choose-your-own adventure type novels, it is indeed possible to produce a structure that works in an untraditional linear fashion, but this requires further work on behalf of the reader.

With an interactive DVD, the path the reader chooses through multiple segments of film requires active participation, unlike a traditional DVD that does not require direct input from a viewer once started, rather their engagement with the narrative itself²⁴¹. A novel can indeed have segments of text contained inside, and use whatever structure it desires to encourage the reader to manually switch between these segments, but it cannot be said that this process is either convenient or subtle. And perhaps most interestingly, with both of these examples, they too can be examined by a discerning or curious reader underneath their structure, ignoring the planned layout to view the film segments in their mechanical sequential order, or reading the choose-your-own adventure novel from beginning to end, ignoring instructions.

This does not mean to say that you will not encounter non-linear narratives in either film or novel, or indeed any medium. There are however common markers prevalent in narratives relevant to the medium that indicate these kinds of non-linear shifts in often blatant and predictable ways. The novel can often

²⁴¹ This process can be reproduced in the cinema as well, but still requires active input from at least one viewer that would otherwise not be required from a normal film.

employ historical letters, conversations from memory or characters in the past, recollections or side stories expanding the history for specific facts or characters. When a novel reaches in a non-linear fashion temporally however, written indicators are almost always used. For letters and other historical items, dates are typically introduced to bookend the segue in time. For memories and other recollections, characters will often preface the beginning and sometimes the end of these sections of text. While the methods for completing temporal shifts of this nature are numerous, it is arguably a bold narrative that does not explicitly broadcast when linearity is broken in a novel. Likewise, film carries its own convention for displaying shifts in time. As a auditory and visual medium, film can be more subtle in announcing the transition in time, and often uses techniques that alter the appearance of characters to make them younger or older, changes to film quality/style to indicate a mode of presentation typical of a particular time period, and music prevalent to a particular time period. When moving forwards in time, film can present environments and scenarios visually that quite quickly demonstrate future events, and often refers to other conventions established in film media to do so; futuristic faster than light travel is visually indicated with streaked or rapidly moving starlight for example²⁴². Film and novel both have the ability to provide narrative that relies on time-shifts, and have established a series of conventional flags to indicate when they move outside of the expected linear narrative progression.

²⁴² The common nature of this effect makes it difficult to pinpoint the origin of this effect, but both Star Trek and Star Wars have exposed large audiences to this type of visual convention. While not a temporal shift per se, modern texts such as Battlestar Galactica still borrow from these established conventions to rapidly introduce complicated concepts regarding faster than light travel using these simple visual indicators.

The key difference here however, is that hypertext in its normal operation does not necessarily clue the reader in to this process. By default hypertext requires more interaction from the readers, and indeed the readers are expecting this. The structure remains hidden²⁴³ from the readers, and where they are expecting simply a linear navigation through their hypertext document on the screen, they can instead be taken upon whatever random or directed path the author intends. Hyperlinks do not, in effect, tell readers either where they are going or where they have been, only that there is a connected segment to the one they are reading. The manner and fashion in which these segments are connected is beyond their ken, and if carefully concealed, can allow an author to utilize a structure that deliberately misleads or misguides a reader to its intentions. Much like a magic trick, hypertext employs smoke and mirrors to disguise its true operation; a mechanical document that is calling up text from a database that has been pre-programmed to include a set structure or employ some form of random operation. For the readers, the results are seamless; they cannot discern the structure of the piece from the work, only the manner in which the work is navigated.

It is because of this difference that hypertext does not lend itself as well to more traditional forms of promotion, such as word of mouth. The experience is personalized based on the machine undertaking the composition of the piece, further complicated by the viewing choices and structural choices made by the reader and author, and potentially abstracted further by mechanical foibles in the distribution of the work. In truth, the only time that readers are able to discuss the

²⁴³ Albeit loosely, and always visible to a prying eye, either by carefully examining potential links, or by disassembling the whole to view the component parts.

work with complete knowledge of its function is when they have disassembled it into its component parts, and have also conceptualized the manner in which the hypertext work functions.

What distinguishes hypertext from other mediums?

Having explored the way in which hypertext distinguishes itself from other forms of media, it is now time to explore the manner in which these differences can be best employed. There are several advantages that hypertext has over its main competitor, traditional print media such as the novel. Firstly, there is the ability to effectively combine media without significant dilution. Combining text, pictures, audio and programming applets is impossible in traditional print, but remains cumbersome on other media such as film as well, where the display device in particular is ill suited to reading long text²⁴⁴. A hypertext piece however can produce images that are of suitable viewing quality, combined with sharp and clear text, combined with an audio track and programming applets in a very fluid and flexible manner. In addition to this, hypertext is also very capable at retrieving relevant data for a particular page in a timely fashion. Whether the work is presented online or stored in some other fashion, the only limitation to the display of these elements of the page is the retrieval rate of the medium and the computation rate of the rendering program. To date, the processing power of modern computers has remained more than capable of the rendering hypertext in a timely fashion, while the increased speeds of broadband internet and faster

²⁴⁴ This was also once a criticism of hypertext as well, where the resolution on screen was considered inferior to the traditional printed word. Much as computer screens have improved, there is a similar improvement in the displays of film and DVD technology, and it is conceivable that as the resolution improves, there will be a stronger convergence of text with film.

portable storage have facilitated the use of higher resolution images, movie clips, streaming audio and rapid retrieval of text.

Another advantage of hypertext lies in its ability to be edited, ported, tested and published. Hypertext is designed to be open to modification by the author, and as generally speaking the hypertext is not transmitted on a fixed medium, but rather the data is sent to a rendering program over the internet, it is entirely possible for an author to make alterations to their work without having to pay the associated costs that other fixed media have. Furthermore, this ability to edit the work can be as transparent or open as the author desires, allowing them to quietly correct spelling or grammar, update artwork to be more contemporary, or completely redesign their layout and structure. These changes can be previewed in an offline environment before being made to the original work, and then once amended to the online version the publication is updated for all who view it from that point onwards. Naturally, this advantage does not apply to hypertext stored on a fixed medium, but even then the source material can be easily retrieved, modified and then reprinted onto a new fixed device²⁴⁵. Furthermore, by publishing hypertext online an author can expose their work to as large an audience as their website can support, limited only by their speeds and traffic rates. The barriers to entry therefore on a hypertext work are significantly lower than that of a traditional novel, where shipping costs and market factors such as excises and import duties can create artificial price inflation and other distribution issues; a hypertext work that is published online is then available to anyone who has the internet, the address of the site or a search engine capable of finding it, and

²⁴⁵ The associated costs of fixed disks today are still substantially cheaper than reprinting a novel per unit, and as such this option does still retain a certain economic feasibility that is lacking in the novel.

a web browser capable of displaying it. This functionality is intrinsic to the internet, and has been the standard means of navigating online for at least a decade, and is therefore commonplace among the intended audience.

Additionally, hypertext can be used to create an immersive experience for the reader by the combination of these diverse elements. The ability to design an interface that responds in a specific and controlled fashion to the reader's input is something that shouldn't be underplayed. Specifically, in terms of creating a specific feel to a work, hypertext is surpassed only by video games in creating an experience that can both draw the reader into the work while at the same time maintaining functionality that they desire to remain comfortable with the work. Simply placing text on a page such as a traditional novel does requires the reader to recreate all the elements of the work in their imagination²⁴⁶. Film provides the visual look to a work, and the sound of the work, creating a definitive and canonical language for what is and isn't allowed in the interpretation of the work, and in effect stifles the imagination as much as it guides it²⁴⁷. Hypertext can work somewhere in-between these two outliers, by supporting text with visual language cues such as are typical of genre works. By using colour and font to encourage a desired result in the reader who responds to the feel of a piece, an author can create an engaging piece without necessarily impeding the imagination of the reader. Creating a design that encourages a reader to both engage with the content of the story and the aesthetics of the work itself can allow an author to present a

²⁴⁶ Arguably, some people prefer it this way, but the one thing that the author of the work cannot control is the manner in which a reader reinterprets their text. In hypertext, the author can at least provide raw building blocks in terms of codified images, sound and interactive programming to encourage a particular end result.

²⁴⁷ Once seen or heard on film, a particular element cannot easily be imagined in any other fashion, be it something mundane like the look of a character, or an element of fantasy or whimsy created artificially; the reader/viewer is privy to the auteur's vision of the work, at the expense of the ability to imagine their own.

work in an appealing manner, while at the same time guiding the reader's response towards a particular reading.

These advantages, while significant, have less impact on the nature of the work that they have on its distribution and layout. In terms of content, hypertext has two key advantages that are not present in the printed novel, and are poorly utilized in film. Firstly, hypertext can create not only links in a piece, but relevant links. No longer is artwork necessarily displayed arbitrarily on an opposite page such as in a novel, perhaps disclosing a fact revealed further down the page unintentionally to the reader; instead, hypertext has the functionality to link image/audio/flash directly to a specific trigger. Whether it is a key word of interest, or scrolling to a particular element on a page, the hypertext work can create relevant contextual links between elements of the piece. Secondly, this contextual linking is not limited to cross media; the text itself can link between relevant pieces of itself.

As basic as it sounds, the functionality to quickly tie two relevant but distinct segments of text together can have a drastic impact on the usability and relevance of a piece. "[A]ll narratives have multiple connections, sequences, and orders other than the linear, syllogistic or sequential order endemic to print narrative."²⁴⁸ By facilitating a non-linear navigation thorough text, even in a rudimentary fashion, hypertext can enable a reader to encounter associations in a text that, while not necessarily obvious when encountered in a linear sense, are in fact associated under other logical systems. Whether this occurs by breaking up a

²⁴⁸ Douglas, J.Y., "Maps, Gaps, and Perceptions: What Hypertext Readers (Don't) Do," from *Perforations* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1992). (n.p.). P 8.

story into its constituent elements for a reader to examine and explore narrative connections, or in a theory piece that provides direct links to tangential arguments is irrelevant; the end result is the same. Functionality that allows the reader to supplement their reading with additional or rearranged information on a topic has a significant impact on both the manner in which they interpret and navigate a hypertext work.

Both of these elements are actually secondary to the chief functionality that lies in hypertext, the ability to rapidly retrieve associated information based on the structural layout designed by the author. “[H]ypertext documents do have some unique aspects: they speed up the rate of information retrieval and they do allow certain kinds of access to proceed at a pace which would previously have been though impossible, or would have required massive and painstaking archival research.”²⁴⁹ The one thing that hypertext does well is associative links between the material contained in the work, and while other mediums can emulate either the functionality or the content, they don’t (currently) have the capability to reproduce this rapid associative database feature that lies in hypertext. “[H]ypertext represents a kind of technology which offers authors and readers alike an opportunity to overcome the rigid and limited technical capacity offered by a print environment.”²⁵⁰ The closest anything comes to this would be either a DVD that has combinations of movies, text and DVD-player compatible programming, or a video game that can draw upon all of these elements to

²⁴⁹ McHoul, A. and Roe, P., “Hypertext and Reading Cognition” from B. Gorayska and J.L. Mey, *Cognitive Technologies: In Search of a Humane Interface*. , 1996, Elsevier Science B.V.. P 355.

²⁵⁰ Douglas, J. Y., "The Three Paradoxes of Hypertext: How Theories of Textuality Shape Interface Design," *Readerly/Writerly Texts 3.2* (Spring/Summer 1996). (n.p.). P 14.

produce a similar or superior work²⁵¹, but at the cost of potentially much more processor power, slower transfer, and a much higher barrier to entry to create the piece. Hypertext is a hybrid medium that draws upon image, sound, and text, places them into an interface that can contain additional functionality, but does so without necessarily requiring substantial effort on the behalf of the reader.

The nature of reading, when challenged with a work that follows such a potentially segmented narrative, allows the reader to re-interpret a linearity that they feel is inherent to the text. “By creating a single, relatively straightforward narrative order out of a multiplicity of narrative orders, these readers manage to arrive at readings of the text which roughly correspond to readings of conventional print narratives.”²⁵² This holds true to all texts, where the linearity of the piece is always broken by even traditional print narratives, where particular focus is paid to elements of the story that are relevant, and then the passage of time is quickly accelerated to another meaningful event, leading the reader to create their own impression of the story that occurred in-between.

Considering the manner in which hypertext can be used to segment and remap texts to preset patterns chosen by the author, it becomes possible to reconcile the idea of a non-linear narrative providing multiple sensible readings to the reader, where in the process of interpretation a reconstruction has occurred of the various segmented elements to create a new whole. “The reader’s paradigmatic interest is displayed in the unique path which she or he takes through

²⁵¹ In terms of quality of the contained material, rather than some intrinsic worth added from the functionality of the game.

²⁵² Douglas, J.Y., "Maps, Gaps, and Perceptions: What Hypertext Readers (Don't) Do," from *Perforations* 3.1 (Spring/Summer 1992). (n.p.). P 17.

a potentially infinite number of such paths in an information web. But each path, as the computer links from node to node, is a purely linear movement. Then, once retrieved, the image, sound or screen-print may or may not be inspected linearly.”²⁵³ The transitions of the hypertext can be as open or closed as the author has dictated in their structure, but this has no direct impact on the process of reading itself, and by extension interpretation made by the reader. Rather than the hypertext changing the meaning of the piece, it instead changes the associations the reader is likely to make given their progress through a hypertext piece.

While hypertext has the ability to organize and recall data quickly and effectively, this ability also is a key factor in where hypertext as a medium can fail. The added complexity of the system ensures that while there can be much done with hypertext, there remains a substantial technological barrier to entry that stops an unskilled author from having full and immediate access to the knowledge and experience required to create effective hypertext works. Hypertext, while capable of being produced using tools that simplify the process, still requires technical expertise in order to ensure the work is functional and broadly compatible. This in turn requires a competent author skilled in the nature of hypertext. Adding to this, the inclusion of other forms of media means that the hypertext author is often not simply a writer; they must instead be something of a renaissance-man, capable of producing text, image, audio, programming and markup, or rely upon others to contribute these elements for them. Although the practice of an author illustrating their own novel has fallen by the wayside, it is still important to note that due to copyright issues and the potential lack of artistic

²⁵³ McHoul, A. and Roe, P., “Hypertext and Reading Cognition” from B. Gorayska and J.L. Mey, *Cognitive Technologies: In Search of a Humane Interface.* , 1996, Elsevier Science B.V.. P 356.

support that comes from self publishing, the hypertext author is often required to produce their own accompanying content. This additional technical and artistic requirement can complicate and extend the production of any hypertext work, as the author develops and implements new skills that are unnecessary for other fiction works.

In addition to requiring a diverse skill base to create, the complexities of a hypertext work require competent design skills. The author of a hypertext piece must be able to create efficient layout that places the elements of their work on the screen to meet both an aesthetic and usable functionality, while at the same time ensuring that the structure of the work, and in particular the text of the work, can be either adapted or written to play on the strengths of hypertext, namely the ability to recall and connect segmented data. The technical limitations of hypertext, combined with the technical limitations of the author of the work are key in determining whether or not a design can be made functional. The complexity of the design can be overwhelming for an author unskilled with the technical knowledge to produce it, just as the design itself may be beyond reproduction in hypertext if too outlandish or complex. The theoretically limitless potential of a hypertext piece is often constrained within the rigid variables of technological skills and design skills of the author, rather than an inherent limit in the medium itself.

Hypertext does have several intrinsic limitations, although they pertain less to the creation of the piece and more to the manner in which the piece will age. Firstly, hypertext cannot be guaranteed to work universally across all

machines that might try to read it. The variables involved in specific user configurations, combined with the varying methods that web browsers and other rendering programs may use to display markup text all but ensures there will be a group of users incapable of viewing the work as the author intended it. There is no mechanical equivalent to this; it is an unfortunate fact that hypertext as a medium is not homogenous in its portrayal across different machines. Unlike a printed novel or film, where slight discrepancies may be created due to the production process but still result in all functional media being primarily identical, the user-reinterpreted nature of hypertext ensures that the level of control exercised by the author over the presentation of the work is limited.

This is closely tied to the second intrinsic limitation of hypertext; it is in no way future-proof. As technology and methodology changes regarding hypertext, distribution medium, display medium and portable computing, changes are made to the manner in which hypertext source material is rendered. Unlike changes to language or film tastes that influence works of a particular time period however, these changes can render existing works unintelligible to modern machines, or otherwise destroy the design and layout. Given that it is impossible to predict the changes that may occur in the future, and it instead falls to the hypertext author to produce a work that is primarily functional now, and adheres as closely as possible to current guidelines. It stands to reason that the end goal for a hypertext author is a work that is functional across as diverse and numerous selection as possible, for as long as possible, but it still remains important to emphasize these fundamental shortcomings of hypertext as a medium.

Designs in Natural Habitat.

This final section of my thesis is directly related to the artistic decisions I've made in creating Natural Habitat, so it seems more natural to adopt a casual tone; please bear with me. Continuing on from my discussion of hypertext, I'll start by exploring the process I used to create my layout for Natural Habitat. When I began working on this piece, I thought I had a fairly solid idea of how I wanted my broad design to be; the links between my segments of story had to be fairly rigidly enforced. I wanted the page to be able to navigate with the illusion of freedom, travelling between genres without barrier, but I didn't want to facilitate an easy way for my reader to travel backwards chronologically, breaking temporality. Furthermore, in the story design I'd already identified points where the genre stories would be intertwining, creating moments where one story directly or indirectly impacted another, and these seemed like they might have some merit if explored in the hypertext design as well. I'd considered employing segments of hidden narrative that further elaborated on the story to encourage a particular reading path in the reader, but decided that short of explaining this functionality explicitly (and in doing so ruining the surprise of it), it would be too haphazard and difficult for the reader to reliably predict. My intention was to reward a reader that chose to read selectively inside a single genre by evolving that genre's story further, but I realised the strength of the story for me primarily came from the cross-pollination of the content that occurred with cross-genre reading.

For me, much of the tension of Natural Habitat comes from not readily being able to fact-check a detail of the story a reader may have missed. In some respects, this more closely follows the traditions of film than the novel, in that it encourages having another read over haphazardly flipping backwards through the text looking for what you may have missed. I wanted to reinforce the ephemeral nature of the story, and discouraging readers from backtracking and rehashing it without the context of beginning-to-end reading seemed to be a good way to do that. My belief was that a narrative too open to an empowered reader risked dilution; by denying movement through the piece selectively, I could refocus the reader's attention on the narrative I had presented, and at the pace I had set. I basically did this design by drawing lots of tree diagrams with one way and two way links between my segments of texts, and lots of attached arrowheads displaying the flow of navigation. There were four designs that made it onto my 'possible' list. A fully free-flowing design that encouraged forwards and backwards navigation was one possibility, but that did nothing for my narrative tension. My second design was one that rigidly locked a reader into one of the four possible genres at the start of the story, and only deviated where the segments of narrative crossed paths. That seemed too restrictive for my own personal reading preference. I considered a design that was an extension of the free-flowing design, but in addition to freedom of movement combined an added element that explicitly flagged the points where a genre-story impacted another, and therefore encouraged a certain movement on behalf of the reader. To be honest this design was quite appealing, but I just felt that it would again undermine the impact of the story I was trying to write.

Considering artificial restrictions like removing backward navigation still didn't quite create the narrative tension I desired, primarily because I felt in the end that the most important parts of the story, where the genres diverge into each other, needed to be understated and there only for an alert and attentive reader, rather than an obvious and belaboured gimmick. This naturally led me to my fourth and final design, where I drew on the previous designs to end up with my current one; unrestricted bilateral movement across the genres, strict unilateral forwards movement inside a genre. This design is naturally a lot more restrictive on the reader, but provides two elements I felt were essential to the work; momentum, and the illusion of freedom. The story can only be caught in the same section for so long before even random navigation forces it forwards, but at the same time the reader is welcome to freely switch between the current time-frame's worth of genres before making that eventual forward movement.

Having created my broad design, I then went on to produce the narrative itself. I was very conscious of trying to deliberately produce any effect that the story was anything more than just that, a story. I didn't want the story to try to be literature, or to be a poor mimicry of pulp fiction, or to attempt too much in terms of character development or plot line. The story had to work, first and foremost, as a linear narrative in my mind. I'd had exposure to some narratives that employed similar techniques of discussing multiple characters and genres, and the strength of those works²⁵⁴ seemed to lie in the equal sharing of the characters; the cast was an ensemble, as were the genre-settings, and each was given fairly equal time and exposure. With that in mind, I attempted to develop four characters that were

²⁵⁴ I am thinking in particular here of Tad Williams' Otherland series.

worthy of developing equally. I originally based these characters fairly closely on a few friends. I borrowed particularly their mannerisms and attitudes, which greatly helped me to create speech that was distinct enough to be from different voices, without losing a certain commonality that people of a similar demographic in terms of age and location would have.

Having a view in my mind of how these people spoke and acted, it was then just a matter of choosing how I'd want to see them change. I initially thought of chronologically exploring changes that these individuals had made in their life that I was aware of, before realizing that I couldn't really borrow so heavily from their lives. Instead I decided to try and take these characters²⁵⁵ somewhere that they would never have been otherwise. I caricatured their personalities somewhat, to diversify what would otherwise be a fairly compatible and comparable group of people, and specialized their interests and backgrounds. I wanted for each individual to have a preference in who else they dealt with in their group of friends, and furthermore, for each individual to have either a competitive rivalry or outright distaste for another in their group as well. These relationships were not necessarily reflected back from the other character, and it is in this manner I created a group dynamic that is intended to be interesting for the reader.

Thinking back to the types of genres I was interested in exploring, I initially chose genres that were playing on the strengths of the characters, and that followed a fairly traditional exploration along those lines of character development. While this seemed to be fairly functional, it didn't really hold much

²⁵⁵ For they were my characters now, having long since removed them from their original inspirations in order to try and change them.

interest for me; it was simply too close to the norm for these works of genre fiction. It was then that I decided I instead needed to displace my characters further, and I began deliberately choosing genres ill-suited to my characters and their typical role in a genre.

My fantasy-based character was unlike a traditional fantasy based character in that he was already fully able to fit into the environment and setting, and rather than coming to a growing acceptance of his place in this world, he became more and more desperate to escape it back to where he felt he belonged. My science fiction character was anti-technologist, further reinforced by events in his story, and saw no need for science to be on a pedestal. Despite being opinionated and direct, his progression is more about distinguishing between his own selfish needs and selfless desires, rather than either the typical political commentary of two cultures clashing that sci-fi often represents, or the discussion of possibilities. The sci-fi character holds no regard for the amazing world he is in, and thinks nothing of destroying the status quo not so much out of a need to improve it, as much as it was to serve his own goals. The piece focuses on the character and his (lack of) evolution, rather than just the setting, and often in science fiction this is not the case.

My detective character was perhaps the most ill-suited to his genre, based on a machismo mindset and a creative imagination; he was never intended to be a fully functional investigator, nor an action hero for that matter. The most ineffectual in his role, this character spends the bulk of his time completely failing to achieve anything held meaningful in the genre of detective fiction, be that the

process of deduction in soft-boiled fiction, or the violent approach of the hard-boiled detective, and instead comes across instead as the character filled with the most pathos over where he is in life, and who finally begins to understand his own failings. Lastly, my horror character needed to explore his genre in an atypical fashion. Often the main lead is a character who is a victim, who then learns to stand up for themselves while other more capable figures around them begin to fall prey to their own flaws and whatever the current antagonist of the piece represents. Instead I wanted a character who was strong, but directionless, who underwent a transformation physically and emotionally that scarred him, with the eventual goal of not building a hero, but rather rebuilding an emotionally vulnerable and yet whole human being.

Of course, we're talking about genre fiction here, in particular popular genres, so I needed to ensure that there were traditional elements governing both my characters and their progression through the story. To that end, my fantasy character does indeed become something of a hero, undertake a quest, there are magical powers and fantastical elements. My science fiction character does get to provide his own commentary on science and politics, and he does indeed get to burst the bubble on a pseudo-utopian world, however inadvertently. My detective character does manage to directly contribute to solving a crime, in between committing several of his own, conducting a few murders, indirectly aiding in a kidnapping of his friend and spending a lot of time drunk. His setting is dark and noir-filled, but the question is raised as to how much of that is fact, and how much is the interpretation of the character. And finally the horror character does indeed encounter a beast, but it is more of a Jekyll and Hyde affair, where he fights

against the darker desires he contains, struggling to find a balance. And also, typical more to horror films than books, there are moments of brutality and violence, explored in detail and with gusto. Basically, the goal was to try and recreate the four genres in question, while still twisting them enough to have a unique element to the work.

There was one final element I introduced into the story; the idea of an overarching realist narrative. Basically, I knew I wanted to separate my characters into their own genre worlds, but I did not know how to undertake this transition. While it is fairly common for both science fiction and fantasy characters to be displaced, and occasionally true of the horror genre, there simply isn't a transition that leads a character smoothly into becoming a detective. So I decided that rather than actually have these transitions occur, they would be instead be internal changes to perspective.

The characters would relate their stories, from a 3rd person limited perspective, and their own genre filter would colour their experiences. That way, I could have a character who believed he was a detective, who experienced things in a stereotypical noir setting, but who could still interact with other characters while they were experiencing their own genre settings. This added additional uncertainty to the text, as only the fantasy character even suspects that something like this may have occurred, and raises for the reader the question of whether or not these characters have undergone any transition or transformation at all.

Naturally, this lends itself very well to multiform narrative, the paradox of the story, so I embraced it further. On one hand, I designed the overarching narrative that explained the events the characters experienced in (relatively) mundane terms; the characters survived a plane crash, and then struggled to find their way out of the Amazonian jungles whilst encountering native villagers and a hidden dictatorship-in-waiting striving to maintain power. The setting worked, in that Ecuador is politically unstable at the best of times, and the Amazon jungle is perhaps one of the few remote and isolated places on Earth where my characters could still conceivably survive for a few weeks without dying of exposure or malnutrition.

On the other hand, I made the reader question this implied overarching narrative by maintaining doubt in both the minds of the characters and the plausibility of the explanation. Did Erik murder a dictator in the jungle, or did he actually fight a chimera? Why does he feel guilty? How did he survive out in the jungle for as long as he did? Why does Mike write about his actions as if he is a criminal, when in his story he was aiding a police case (however indirectly), and furthermore in his story he had the implied authority to do so? Does Jonathon now have the ability to understand languages he has never heard before? Why is Will so concerned over the watch and wedding ring, and how did he end up covered in blood? These questions are hinted at, although in the first version of the story they were explicitly raised in the epilogue.

Again, I felt that perhaps it was belabouring the point, and that simply raising the barest hints that these events occurred would be enough to seed the

doubt I hope resides in the reader. The diary entries are a further attempt to reconcile these differences, while at the same time underlining the fact that the question does indeed remain open; did these characters experience events as they saw them, or rather as they retold them in their diaries? There are several possible readings to be made of this story, and this is further complicated with the selective readings made possible in the hypertext version, which arguably will encourage the reader to choose either the genre-story or the realist story over one another, or indeed completely miss the realist story entirely.

As part of creating the piece, I mapped out and wrote the individual character arcs and story segments ahead of the book-end pieces of text that would serve as my introduction and epilogue. In the process of creating these book-ends for the story however, I found that I needed to distance the realist mode of narrative further from the genre-fiction inspired pieces. As these pieces both are presented from both genres perspectives outside of the four main characters, I chose to acknowledge this distance by employing a more traditional format for dialogue sections. As dialogue was occurring between more than two characters, using tag lines such as “said Erik” etc allowed me to reduce the confusion about the narrative flow in these areas of text, while at the same time emphasise the generic conventions of the realist genre through the mundane elements of the dialogue syntax. This did have the negative effect of creating a passive tone over the initial introductory section of the narrative, but I feel also helped to reinforce the shift in narrative mode between the realist-seated introductory piece and the genre-seated limited perspectives used in subsequent character sections.

Similarly, in the 3rd person limited perspectives, I elected to use several techniques to streamline my writing, and relied on an implicit shorthand approach to doing this. When using dialogue in these sections, rather than indent each new line of spoken text, I chose to only indent the text of characters “external” to my narrator for the section. The active character’s spoken words were not indented, creating a clear visual indicator between when the active character for the section was speaking, and when someone was speaking to them. A similar convention was used when relaying inner monologue from my characters, where italicised text was used in place of more traditional “thought Erik” style tag lines. This convention allowed me to rapidly shift between spoken, descriptive and monologue sections of text with a fluidity that enabled me to emphasise when thoughts quickly followed speech, or to closely tie an idea in with a description for example.

Having created a story that in my mind needed a fluid layout, and having a design layout that appeared to compliment the work, I was now at the stage where I had to make it all work together. It is pretty much at this point that the entire piece nearly fell apart. The artistic designs and specific page layout designs seemed contradictory and this was further complicated by my need to include large bodies of text per page. I was certain I needed to include genre-related artwork, in order to help a reader identify which character/genre they were reading about, so I initially worked with thematic backgrounds. This unfortunately rendered the text unreadable. I also wanted to have no scrolling on my page, having explored the notion that scrolling on a webpage encouraged skim reading and made it difficult for people to keep track of where they were. This caused

numerous internal links to appear in my early designs, which basically amounted to flipping a page of a book, but muddled up my layout significantly. Finally, my navigation tool had to be simple and automatic, and preferably hidden inside the rest of the interface. I couldn't even begin to design four genre-specific navigation tools that nested neatly with my artwork and at the same time were simple to use. I knew I had the following limitations on my work though; the artwork or photography had to be mine, the layout had to work universally (or near to) on all browsers, and the text had to remain the focus of the piece.

It was with much trial and error that I eventually solved those problems, but instead of exploring what went wrong, I'd rather discuss where I think the piece started to go right. Firstly, there is my page layout. I have always been unhappy with presenting text in a widescreen aspect ratio, simply because it is uncommon for readers to encounter. Column functionality seemed to be complicated, and in the end I decided I liked the idea of a single column of text.

I was initially uncertain about the best way to present the text itself on the page, torn between concerns of aesthetics and functionality. With previous works, I found my text became almost secondary in my layout, as visual elements and control mechanics took precedence because of technical limitations. As a writer, I've always felt that the most familiar form of displaying text, regardless of the medium, is to rely on existing symbolism, and choose a frame and format appropriately. My instinct when presenting *Natural Habitat* was to attempt to replicate the function of pages in a book. Much of my initial technical development went into finding an elegant way of recreating the feel and form of a

page flip, presenting text much as if written in a single book, with the borders of the page represented in the hypertext framework. With *Natural Habitat* however, I found that this interrupted the flow of my already segmented novel too substantially; I was creating a work intended to be consumed in pieces, and these pieces did not elegantly break into smaller sections. Where a novel might have a chapter spanning many pages, the limitations on the electronic interfaces I could produce in hypertext seemed to exacerbate the unnatural pauses in the text forced by pagination limits.

Referring to my own general web browsing habits, I quickly came to realise that vertical scrolling text had become the dominant form of presenting long written sections, and started to redesign my hypertext accordingly. I still wanted to maintain the feel of page pauses, because I felt they were in a way natural when reading novel-styled material. At the same time, I also recognised that I would need to find a way of fluidly both representing the page barrier, but without having the technology of the medium over-emphasise the pauses in reading. Having decided to include my sectionalised text on a electronic single page, I then designed a way of separating the artificial pages from each other. I then broke the page designs into separate sizes, to ensure I could exercise a greater level of control over my artificial page breaks, and then set to work forcibly paginating *Natural Habitat*, creating what I hoped would be a fluid piece that also attempted to acknowledge the contemporary reading experience.

After several attempts at consolidating my new design with my initial attempts at forced pagination, I settled on the final design of the piece, each

section on a page in a scrollable section, with additional tools fixed around the scrolling text. As discussed above, I made this column scrollable rather than filled with page-turner links, but in order to help the reader keep their place I utilised the artwork that segmented the paragraphs and was visually identifiable. This in turn let me create the genre-specific feel to the artwork that employed the same functionality regardless of the image, and with some time in Photoshop and spent researching various recording materials throughout the ages and the look of textured materials, I managed to create paragraph-backing artwork that while genre-related and visually appealing, still managed to allow the text to remain readable.

Under this artwork I then placed an overall jungle-themed artwork, visually signalling the dual nature of the story while still giving me a solid shared background theme. Having met my aesthetic requirements, I then needed to look at usability requirements, and it is here that I began exploring the usage of relative sizing in my work. Natural Habitat is designed with a layout that snaps relatively to the font size selected by the user. This initially basically broke everything on the page, but I felt it was important that the user could select a larger or smaller font as per their reading preference, without necessarily suffering the ghastly spanning graphics and otherwise broken layout that normally results from these user preferences. Given the additional width on the page anyway from my column format, I had plenty of room to allow the artwork to snap along with the increased font-size, it was just a matter of maintaining relationship-based sizing, which was eventually solved using div tags that are sized based on em-sizing, a relative font size dictated by the browser itself.

I then had to consider the functionality of the navigation tool. Having abandoned the idea of genre-specific iconography on my navigation due to the gaudy presentation of the otherwise themed pages, I instead went in search of a navigation design itself that would symbolize travelling through the text. In the end I decided on a compass, in part because it fitted with the idea of an explorer in the jungle, and looked good on the jungle background, but also because the four compass points related nicely to my four major characters. The functionality of the needle was fun to play with, and I believe should naturally draw the curiosity of the reader.

The problem was that a compass doesn't have any accompanying text, which again made me consider story iconography or character faces for distinguishing between the four genres. Instead, I decided that alongside the compass, I could include an old fashioned mechanical calendar. This worked exceptionally well for the piece, in that the date winder could be advanced to demonstrate the advancement of time within the story, but at the same time gave me a text field that I could change to flag the four genres to the reader in a relatively unobtrusive fashion. The addition of the diary elements for each section relied on further iconography, with a book signalling that these were the personal diaries of the four characters, which could then be opened or closed by the reader at any time without navigating away from the relevant page.

Finally, there is the inclusion of audio on the pages. On one hand I considered not including any ambient audio to the work, because it can be

irritating and distracting, but on the other I felt it added to the very strong genre feel that had been created on the pages. The final decision was to allow both audio and silence; the reader can select whether or not they are interested in having the accompanying audio.

I had considered employing specific audio for traumatic moments like the plane crash in the prologue, but it de-emphasised the focus of this work, the text. Additionally, I considered a fully narrated version of Natural Habitat that would be accessible to the reader at their discretion on the disk version; however time constraints ruled this option out from the current publication. This is however an idea that I may choose to revisit at a later stage.

CONCLUSION:

This exegesis began by exploring the manner in which we read and engage with narratives, and the development of narratives throughout history. From our early oral traditions to our contemporary efforts in a variety of mediums, the goal has remained the same. Narrative is about conveying a conceptual idea from one mind to another, in as effective a manner as possible. That does not necessarily mean conveying narrative without dilution, or maintaining perfect homogeneity from one mind to another, but rather the rendering of the concept into readily identifiable elements, combined in recognisable patterns, intended to best ensure the interpreter of the narrative can reconstruct the concept the progenitor was intending to convey. Narrative fails when it leaves the interpreter without either the identifiable structure for reconstruction, or identifiable narrative elements to fit into that structure, and it is by recognising and creating narrative with an awareness of this function that we can best ensure concepts remain communicable.

Narrative structure provides more than simply a framework for assembling a narrative, it is the key to understanding how the elements of a narrative can effectively fit together and best be understood by an interpreter. Structure does not have to be something rigidly defined, but it must be recognisable to the interpreter, and is often based on similar works by genre or medium. The structure of a work, be it the elements of character and setting, the language used, the formulae of the plot, or the narrative pacing, all require shared knowledge on the behalf of the progenitor and the interpreter; this knowledge is often distributed

and reinforced through cultural works, and allows for structures to evolve and expand/fragment over time, as new material drives this process. Structure does not operate in isolation, and as much as the structure of a piece is intrinsic to understanding the concept conveyed by the progenitor, it is equally important in understanding the place that concept has amongst others.

Genre plays different roles for the progenitor and the interpreter of a narrative. For the progenitor, genre rules help define elements that can be included, must be included, and must be excluded. Taking a broad genre like science fiction, it is possible to include elements of fantasy, it must include something discussed from either a positive or negative scientific perspective, and it typically does not require a narrative format that presents entirely in iambic pentameter. Genres of form and genres of content both serve as guidelines for the progenitor when creating and presenting their work, providing them with both common elements of their chosen form and content, as well as an understanding of the interpreter's own expectations from the work.

Truly effective narrative does not write to meet every expectation of an interpreter, it instead explores the limitations that genres delineate, and works with an awareness of these expectations toward producing a piece that while not meeting every expectation, travels mostly along a course satisfying for the interpreter. For the interpreter, genre serves as a tool to both selecting and understanding narrative. As exposure to new genres increase, reader preference develops, and readers begin to selectively read among works of thematic and structural content that they find appealing. This body of work serves as a

referential tool, allowing the interpreter to better understand the elements of a work and their construction, weighing the work against their pre-conceived notion of what the work should be.

Readers have shown an interest in reading similar themed works repeatedly, but it is not because these works are identical, but rather because they retain similar aspects. Genres may also be better suited to a particular medium, and as such can have influence over the works that are produced for that medium, either varying them to better draw on the medium's strength, or precluding them from being produced in particular mediums entirely.

Multiform narratives focus on works that break expected rules in a work to provide an element of paradoxical uncertainty. Whether the work employs a breaking of temporal linearity, or breaks linearity through multiple unreliable narrators, it often becomes the burden of the interpreter to reassemble the narrative into a coherent whole. Multiform narratives require additional work on behalf of the interpreter, and increase the likelihood that the concept of the work may be misconstrued between progenitor and interpreter, but simultaneously open up the possibility of multiple intended readings in a single piece.

Multiform narratives lend themselves to particular genres and mediums better than others; crime fiction in particular benefits from the unreliable narrators that serve as witnesses to an act, but this could equally apply to drama or romance genres, where the differences perspective allow for unexpected events and character developments based on misconstrued situations and outcomes.

Similarly, science fiction, and to a lesser extent fantasy and horror all can employ temporal distortion to further the emphasis of the plot, without necessarily working outside of the confines of the particular genre. Whether it is a time machine, a mythical deity or a slighted spirit, there remains a genre-functionality that allows for the breaking of linearity, with the purpose of further exploring the other aspects of the narrative; the plot, the setting, or the characters. Multiform narratives are far more common than is often acknowledged, and indeed many contemporary narratives are excluded from the category more because of a lack of understanding toward the manner in which segmented text is reassembled into a complete whole, rather than any key difference in the work itself.

Hypertext as a medium remains poorly utilised, and yet has the potential for much exploration in the area of creative works. Very few mediums allow the progenitor to produce narrative in combination with visual and auditory information, interactive content, and flexible structures, while at the same time remaining relatively easy to produce and distribute. There are of course serious limitations to the medium, perhaps most significantly the bias towards printed materials that exists currently in our culture, but they do not obviate the strengths that lie in the genre: Hypertext remains one of the most fluid, open, and readily distributed mediums currently in use. Effective use of hypertext remains more than an understanding of image, or audio, or programming, or even writing, and instead requires a combination of these elements, both in order to produce a text that draws on the strengths of hypertext, as well as to emphasise those strengths. The evolution of this medium is still occurring, and it is by nature transient in both its storage and distribution, but there remains an opportunity to develop effective

works in this medium now, and it is an opportunity that is being squandered by the bulk of today's authors.

Natural Habitat stands as my own attempt to work with the medium of hypertext and produce a narrative that remains both functional as a traditional novel, and yet emphasises the strengths of the hypertext medium. It is a piece of multi-generic, multiform fiction intended to appeal to as wide an audience as possible without undermining the integrity of the individual genres that are used, and at the same time attempts to tell a story that is engaging because of its characters, its settings, its commentary and its presentation. It has been my intention to produce a piece that meets all of these goals, and that employs the methodology, arguments and understandings arrived at in this exegesis. This exegesis explores the basis for the work, the ideology underlying the work, but *Natural Habitat* is a work of creative fiction, and it remains to be seen whether it will achieve its prime goal; to entertain.

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Natural Habitat.

Adam Baker.

This novel is dedicated to my mother. So, as you read all the horrible,
violent and reprehensible proceedings held herein, remember; she gave me life.

Prologue.

“So what brings you boys out here anyway?” the pilot asked Erik.

“Well, the short answer is probably me... but I guess it’s a lot of reasons really,” Erik replied.

“My name’s Jack by the way... hey, you guys all buckled up back there?” the pilot said, craning his head over his shoulder and squinting into the gloom of the cabin.

“Yeah, we’re good...” Mike shouted over the engine noise.

“Should he really be doing that while we’re flying through cloud?” Will nervously asked Jonathon. Jonathon put down his book and pretended to be considering the question. “No, probably not... but what are ya gonna do, he’s flying right?” he finally replied, before nonchalantly returning his attention to his page.

The four men were seated comfortably in the cabin of the Cessna 406. Jonathon and Will sat next to each other, Will insisting on a window seat to see what was happening. Mike sat alone near the back of the plane, hoping to catch some rest before they arrived in Quito, and Erik had taken a seat near the pilot. Their luggage had mostly been stowed in an underbelly cargo pod, and besides a few belongings kept for amusement on the flight, the airplane was decidedly spartan.

“So you were saying you’re all on holiday or somethin?” Jack asked Erik over his shoulder.

“Yeah, well, it’s a bit of everything really. My dad needed to send someone out here to check out some business... he’s kinda got things on the go all over the place. He said he wanted me to do it, but I’m kinda on a break so I decided to turn it into a bit of a vacation. Nat and I are just finishing up our uni work, so we thought we’d spend some time off seeing the sights. Mike’s just kinda... I’m not sure why he’s here, actually. He really should be working, but he’s just up and decided to come along... I think it’s mostly for the booze,” Erik said, as he watched the clouds out of the windshield.

“How about the other guy? The nervous one?” the pilot asked, as he adjusted his pitch slightly and sent a shudder through the plane’s wings.

“Will? Well, he kinda needs a break from everything...” Erik said, turning to make sure Will wasn’t listening in.

“He’s going through a bit of a tough time, just left his wife, quit his job... think he’s looking for some kinda change of pace... and he’s a friend, so hey, the more the merrier.” Erik added, smiling.

“Ahh... I’m married, I can kinda relate to that. Never had the balls to up and leave... but ya know, now that I’m a bit older, I’m really glad I didn’t. Still, I guess it doesn’t always work out,” amended Jack, conciliatorily.

Thick cloud banks were forming ahead of them, and the pilot began checking his instruments.

“I think we should go below this... I’m not happy flying around here without better visibility, too many other small planes. Might wanna hold onto your seat for a bit.” Jack said, before smoothly moving his hands on the controls and speaking into his radio. The nose of the plane dove precipitously, and clouds streaked past them for several seconds before the sky became clear again.

“Yeah, so you were saying? So it’s a working holiday huh? How the hell do two uni bums, an unemployed guy and a boozehound pay for a trip all the way out here?” asked Jack, amused.

“Ahh... well, we’ve all had a bit of money put aside... but uhm, because it’s business, my Dad has chipped in a bit too...” replied Erik, haltingly.

“What, even for your friends? That’s awful nice of him...” Jack added, smiling.

“I guess... well, he can afford it. I don’t like to talk about it, ya know? I get enough crap from the guys... he’s got a bit of money, and he’s kinda doing this as

a favour to me. And like I said, I'm out here to work too, so I guess it's win-win."

Erik said, trying to keep his tone neutral.

"Say no more... sounds like you guys are going to be in for some fun. So, you ever been out to Quito before?" Jack asked.

"No, never... I've traveled around a bit, but never somewhere quite so wild. I think Mike might have been here and there... Nat has done a few conferences already... and Will hasn't ever flown, so yeah, he's a bit nervous. I thought we'd probably spend a few days bumming around, seeing the sights in town, and then head out into the jungles... Nat wants to see a volcano or a caldera or something... I think we're all kinda psyched about it, actually." Erik concluded.

"Good, good... it's a great thing, going out on your own, traveling a bit. Did it a lot when I was just starting out, then the wife and I... good times. We've got an hour or two before we're going to set down, you might wanna grab yourself a bit of rest before that happens. Sounds like you're gonna be busy when we get there." Jack laughed, before checking his controls.

*

Jack focused on the controls in front of him. The weather was taking a turn for the worst, and he had again been forced to take a lower altitude and try to outrun the storm. The storm was sitting up to 40,000 feet, well over the service ceiling of the Cessna, and he had little choice for alternative landing areas. The

first drops of rain had begun to form on the windshield canopy, and already the air was growing turbulent. Risking a quick look behind, Jack saw his passengers had all fallen asleep. *Thank fuck... last thing I need now is them panicking... should be fine to get through this, just gotta stay focused, stay ahead of the rain...*

Ahead, Jack could see several small hills were visible. Covered in lush jungle vegetation, the trees looked particularly vibrant against the dark contrast of the stormy sky. Smiling at the beauty of the scene, Jack checked his instruments again. A flash in the corner of his eye drew his attention to the hills below. *It's too soon for lightning... oh my god, what is that!* Rising rapidly from the trees, a thick white smoke trail was heading towards the plane. Desperately, Jack tried to pull the stick back and bank away. With a loud roar, the aircraft swung violently around as the ground fired projectile slammed into its left engine. Immediately, the plane began to lose altitude, and thick black smoke began to pour into the cabin from outside.

Jack grimly grabbed the controls and forced the plane into a controlled descent. His fuel gauge was getting close to redline, and his second engine had begun to fail already. Behind him, he heard the passengers screaming out incoherent cries, but everything was muffled to his ears now. The terrific force of the impact, combined with the sudden pressure change had ruptured both of his ear drums, and thin trickles of blood wound their way unheeded down his neck. He screamed out behind him, telling everyone to hang on, as he guided their dying plane down towards the ground below.

The engine on the left exploded again, the last of its fuel igniting in the fiery burst. It tore away part of the wing it was attached to, and a gaping rent appeared in the metal of the cabin. Jack turned, to see what the damage was. He watched wordlessly as, without even a cry of surprise, Will was torn from his seat. Jonathon sat in shock, his hand inches from where Will had just been moments ago. Stunned, Jack turned back to his controls. *Gotta find somewhere... must be somewhere... there, there! We're coming in too fast... if I hang on, I can lock the foils up... might let us wash off some speed...* The plane slammed beneath the treeline now, and with the muted tearing of metal, the tail section tore away against the grasping branches. Jack felt the sharp pull as the rear of the plane separated, taking the seats at the back with it. *Holy crap, no! Gotta put it down, gotta put it down...* In his hands, Jack felt the controls go dead. The damaged wing sheared off, leaving the plane tearing violently through the foliage, completely out of control.

Oh god oh god... I can't do anything more... those poor bastards... it's too late, can't radio... I shoulda radioed... Jesus... Diane... I'm so sorry...I love you...

With a bone-shattering thump, the nose of the plane bit into the dirt, driving the fragmented canopy glass violently back into the cockpit. Jack's flesh was lacerated by the dense material, even as the controls slammed into his abdomen and ruptured his organs. Jack never felt anything, he was already dead; the force of the impact had snapped his neck.

Jonathon's Diary, Prologue.

October 31st

Okay, so we're going for a trip. I've never really flown before... I don't even know how long this is going to take. I guess I'm excited, a little. Anyway, Erik is making us all do diaries... I swear, he's got to be tapped or something. Wonder if his diary is going to have pressed flowers in it. Anyway, we write in these things, then at the end of the trip he makes a wonderful collage of our travel stories. And then we laugh at him and stuff, I guess. Good fun. Okay, so I'm packing, and now it's your turn, little diary. In you go. You can sit right next to my underwear.

Erik's Diary, Prologue.

Day 1.

This is a diary of Erik, Nat, Will and Mike's trip to Ecuador. Well, technically this is just Erik's diary. Uhm, my diary. Wow, I wonder if it's too late to go buy a new one... this started bad. Anyway, we're packing for the trip, and I have to say, I'm really looking forward to this. For too long, I've sat at home, staring out of windows, waiting for something to happen. Time to travel, to see new things, new places. I think Nat is mostly along to look at lizards, though, and I won't even get into why Mike and Will are coming. Still, it should be great.

Will's Diary, Prologue.

Travel diary, entry 1

This is going to be a diary about our trip to Ecuador. I've never been anywhere, so this should really be exciting. The last few years of my life I've been kinda listless, after something new. This might be my last chance to find that something new, and I'd be a fool not to take it. Erik wants us to keep a diary of our trip, he wants us to write down all the interesting things that happen... it seems a little trite, a travel diary, but who knows with him, maybe he's going to make a movie or something. I'm really looking forward to this... I was a little worried, at first, but the more I think about it the more I want to do it. I am ready.

Mike's Diary, Prologue.

The diary of DOOM!

Diaries are for pussies. I just want that, on the record, right now, before anything happens. I don't know what kind of drug deal Erik has going on, so if things go sour, those words are my epitaph. Diaries are for pussies. Say it with me. Catchy, right? I think so. Well, Erik wants us to keep a diary. I think he's a dick. He probably thinks he's a dick too, so I guess we agree on something. This here is the diary in question. Some might question its voracity, its hunger for knowledge. Some might question its integrity, its purpose, or even its black, sinister motives. Me? I like to think of it as a dark grimoire, recording experiments both cruel and vile, inflicted upon my many enemies. Like Erik. See, Erik, buddy? I've got your diary right here, pal.

Chapter 1: Jonathon.

The first thing Jonathon noticed was that his left arm was covering his face. Dreamily, he tried to move it aside, but it was dead.

Hmph... musta fallen asleep on my side again. All numb, right shoulder downwards... gotta get this fucking thing off my face.

With an unintentionally spasmodic lurch, Jonathon raised his right hand, grabbed his dead arm by the wrist, and flung it to his side. Unexpectedly, his arm didn't stay at his side, but swung wide. And then rolled over a small hill, and down into scrub a few metres away.

What the fuck! That's not my arm! What the hell?!

Flailing wildly, wide awake now, Jonathon discovered that his left arm HAD gone numb, but that wasn't what he'd thrown aside so carelessly. In shock, startled and panicked, Jonathon sat bolt upright. His face drained of colour, his vision swam before his eyes, and Jonathon slowly keeled to the side, blacked out from his sudden movement.

*

I remember the crash. We were flying in low, can't have been too far from the airport, and we hit something. The door swung wide, people were screaming,

air came rushing in. We were falling, falling fast, falling sideways, flaming and smoking. Metal tore, screamed behind us, over the voices, and then there was only the whistling. Erik and I were up front, sitting behind the pilot. He couldn't scream, he didn't have time to scream. I couldn't see any more, the smoke had started blowing into the cabin, but freakily I could breathe easier, because the plane had dropped low enough for the air to become thicker. And then we brushed through trees and scrub, stopped midair for a second, and everything went white. I think that was the sky, I think I saw the sky over me, as the plane tore apart around me, and I went flying forwards, and downwards, through more trees, and into dirt. Hitting the ground hurt. I remember thinking that, that was all I could think, I couldn't feel anything anymore, but I was stunned from hitting the dirt.

*

Slowly, Jonathon opened his left eye. Blinded, he shut it again. He tried his right, but it was caked shut, and gooey, and took even longer to open. Again, blinded, he shut his eye. Blinking rapidly, he stared up through the trees. Slowly, his eyes adjusted, and as he lay, he found himself looking at the beautiful cloud formations gathered above. Rich greens contrasting elegantly against the... *I smell a wood fire, a lovely wood fire...* blue sky and white clouds. Birds flew in lazy ... *I think someone is cooking something, it smells so good...* circles above, landing gracefully on the trees... *I can feel the warmth of the fire, it's a tingling sensation, my leg hairs are standing on end...* and chirping beautiful songs. Songbirds, that's what... *My toes are getting warm now, I can feel life coming back into me, maybe it's the sunlight...* they're called. And they're so beautiful... *I think I'm on fire...*

but understated, you know...*I think my feet are on fire...* not like those stupid toucans you see on canon printer ads...*My pants are on fire...* with their vibrant hues and true-to-life colours...*What the hell? I'm on fire!*

Jonathon rolled to his left, unintentionally following the path of the severed limb he had carelessly thrown aside only moments ago. His legs and shoes were burning, soaked in some combustible liquid that had oozed from the wreckage that had surrounded him. Rolling fast, trying to put out the flames, not even knowing what was happening or why, Jonathon's body was cut by innumerable shards of rent steel and sharp stones. Finally, his pants burnt out, smothered by his movements. He breathlessly came to a stop at the base of a large tree. Sitting up, Jonathon looked around, properly, for the first time. He was about ten metres away from the nose cone of their small plane, or the bulk of its detritus in any event. He sat on loamy earth, moist and covered in moss and ground cover and pieces of plane. Small fires burned around him all over the area. The fires were feeding weakly off the doused wreckage however, and were unable to spread properly to the surrounding moist groundcover and clay soil. Looking further around, Jonathon could see that he sat in some type of clearing, natural, and that he was very much in the middle of thick, Amazonian forestland. No one appeared to be around, hale and hearty or severed and dismembered. Reaching backward, looking for a purchase to raise himself to his feet, Jonathon wrapped his hand around a wrist. Screaming now, he threw himself forward and upward, heedlessly walking on his singed feet as he swung around to see what lay behind him.

Fuck it, there's that arm again!

Calming himself, Jonathon leaned against the tree and took a few moments to catch his breath. Looking himself up and down, he noticed for the first time the cuts on his chest and legs, and he felt the sting of the scrapes that no doubt crossed his back. *Feet aren't too bad at least... a little warm, a little pinked, but I think they smothered fast enough to keep most of my skin.* Jonathon noticed a deep cut in his left side, just below his hipline, a tear through jeans and skin and fat, not quite down to the bone, but not far from it. *An inch, that's an inch long cut...and deep. At least it doesn't move much when I walk... got lucky there. No way I can stitch that up out here. Where the hell is everyone? Why can't I hear sirens and screams and people?* Jonathon's eyes trailed down from his hip to the severed limb at his feet. After taking another tentative look, to make sure it wasn't his after all and he was imagining a phantom limb, he gingerly picked the severed limb up by the wrist.

Who the hell is missing an arm anyway? It's not mine... I feel pretty sure of that. Mike's arms are thicker than this...and it has a wedding ring, so that rules out Erik too... it's gotta be Will's. It's got a watch on though, so how could it be his? He never wears his "shackle of oppression" anymore. But it can't be anyone else's...just can't, it's too young to have been the pilots...the skin is all pale and there's no tan, and arms don't exactly stow in the luggage...Fuck, maybe he's around here somewhere, bleeding to death!

Dropping the arm, staggering, upright, and somewhat drunkenly, Jonathon began to circle a perimeter of the crash site. Walking slowly, carefully past the

nose of the plane, he took a look inside. *That's a lot of blood. Most of that is the pilot, buckled into his chair. No way he survived that ...eviscerated by the controls... urk.* Jonathon leaned to the side of the nosecone, and quietly threw up. Brushing his face with his shirt, he looked in again, calmer now. *Don't think anyone else was in there though. As much of the man is missing, there aren't any obvious extra bits out here. Maybe everyone else was thrown clear. Or burned up... or eaten. How long have I been out? Those fires had burned kinda low...and great, the pilot doesn't have his arms either. How the hell am I supposed to see who survived if everyone is gonna make me play cluedo with their arms?*

Jonathon heard a low groaning noise behind him, a reasonable distance away. He turned, but all he could see was a tree, smoking and scarred with wreckage. He walked over to the tree, picking his way over the larger pieces of metal, and walked around the base of the tree. *No one around. What am I supposed to do...* Jonathon paused, looking at a trickle of liquid coming out of the tree. *It must be sap from a cut, damn, that takes ages to trickle out... this wreckage has been here a few hours at least. What am I supposed to do?* Touching the sap, Jonathon noticed it hadn't hardened, and was still liquid to the touch. *So it's maybe fresher than I thought. Still a few hours. What the hell am I supposed to do?* Frustrated, scared, and confused, Jonathon leaned back and screamed into the sky, "What the FUCK am I supposed to FUCKING DO!"

"...cough... how about... how about, getting me down, damnit..."

Jonathon's eyes slowly tracked upwards, following the trail of sap, following it up the tree about three metres, where it mixed with blood, and saw Erik, wedged between two branches, looking at him with the stupidest grin on his face and with one beady eye looking back.

"Hell, I'm coming. Why didn't you say something? Are you okay?"

"Nat, if I could have made ..*cough*... any more noise while you were busy... busy hurking over... the plane, I'd probably, probably be strong enough to pull myself free, yeah?"

Jonathon started to climb up the tree, using the lower branches to haul his tired, sore body upwards with his hands, and then bracing his legs against the trunk. After some effort, he managed to climb up to where Erik lay, his torso pinned between two branches, his chest wedged into the wooden pinion.

"If I pull these apart, do you think you can push yourself free?"

"Sure... if you can do it. I'm not sure... I think I've got a broken rib or two, but I'm... I'm strong enough to slide free, if you can separate these damn twigs..."

"Okay, when I start to push, you hold onto that branch, that branch right there... with a bit of luck you can pull yourself out, and hang onto it, 'til I help you drop down".

Jonathon tugged on the two branches pinning Erik, as Erik pulled on another branch in front of his head. Things were going fine until Jonathon lost his footing with his burnt shoes, and put all his weight on the top branch to catch himself. With a tearing sound, the branch snapped wetly from the tree, fibers flaying Erik across his back, who, without being pinned anymore, shot forward under his own weight and kicked Jonathon in the face, knocking him loose from his tenuous grip, before both men fell to the ground, stunned.

“Cheers Nat, its great to know... that when I’ve got broken ribs... the best idea you’ve got for getting me out of a tree... is to shoot me out...”

Jonathon, stunned from his fall, rolled over to face Erik.

“Ah fuck it, I’ve had a really bad day, and having you kick me in the head really didn’t help to make it much better.”

*

Later, after having checked each other for injuries, tending their wounds as best they could, Jonathon and Erik finished a survey of the wreckage. They didn’t find any more bodies, or any signs that anyone had survived. After waiting half of the afternoon, they came to the conclusion that help was not coming for them. They resolved to set out for a day’s travel, in either direction, to see if they could find someone, anyone, but in particular Will or Mike, or their remains. If they

found help, they would bring them back to the plane wreckage. Erik decided he would head north, following the path the plane had intended to take, towards the airport, or what he guessed was the path. After watching Erik slowly limp into the thick jungle, Jonathon picked himself up, and trudged south, following the path of the wreckage, and hopefully, the direction where he would find his other friends.

November 1st

Well that was just fucking hilarious. I love crashing planes, lets go again. In case you can't tell, things are a bit (read: completely) fucked up right now. Less than 2 days into our "vacation", we've been left stranded in the Amazon jungle. My friends are blown or smeared over the jungle, except Erik, who is busily stitching up a hole in my jeans. An equally large hole got ripped into my ass, but he's already stitched that up. I feel woozy and sick, and I woke up hugging a severed arm, so someone isn't walking out of here. We're going to split up, try to find help, or our friends. Erik thinks we'll find our friends, anyway. I'm not sure what we'll find.

Thought for the day: Stick tastes like shit, avoid eating it at all costs.

Chapter 1: Erik.

Erik woke up groggily. All he could smell was smoke, but in his mouth he tasted blood. Opening his eyes, Erik saw he was quite high off the ground, and he quickly shut them again as he fought off a wave of nausea. *Damn... that's really high up. Urgh, there's pressure on my ribs and... I think I'm stuck in a tree. Maybe when we crashed... I... can't hear anyone else around... lots of smoke, lots of wreckage. I hope the other guys made it...*

After some wriggling and struggling, Erik discovered that he was firmly pinioned between two tree branches. Each movement drove a stabbing pain into his chest, forcing him to stop moving for the time being. Opening his eyes again, trying to fight off the vertigo he was feeling, Erik examined himself as best he could. Deep scrapes across his chest, combined with the pressure of the tree were making it hard to breathe. Black spots periodically came and went before his eyes as pain caused him to wince and reduce his chest expansion further.

Wow, what are the odds. I've survived a plane crash, but now I'm stuck in a tree. What can I do? I can't call for help, because I can barely get the air to stay awake. I haven't heard anything moving behind me... Behind Erik came an unusual sound, like a blocked drain flooding.

“...hey... hey can you *cough* hear me... hey... hey *cough wheeze*...”

Erik had to stop and fight for breath, so he tried to kick his feet and make the tree rustle, but stopped when he realised how quiet the noise was compared to the pain he experienced. *If I can't hear the tree over the throbbing of blood in my head, and that noise, I doubt anything else can hear me either. And... now... black...black spots.* Erik shut his eyes, on the verge of blacking out, just as he heard a familiar voice, raised in its own seemingly futile cry, “What the FUCK am I supposed to FUCKING DO!”

Gathering the last of his breath, Erik managed to call out a reply.

“...cough... how about... how about, getting me down, damnit...”

*

Nat, the only survivor of the plane crash in the area, had stumbled over to beneath the tree, nauseated from the sight of the pilot's mangled corpse trapped mere metres behind the unaware Erik. Seeing Erik's predicament, Nat had quickly tried to free him. *That's it man, climb up... oh damnit, don't lean on that branch, you're crushing me like a... argh... that's better. Okay, so, nice and easy, just lift that branch, yep, that one, and I can* **ARRGH NO! WHAT ARE YOU doing?!** *and...THUD ... and down we go. Urgh, that could have gone better.*

Stunned, lying in a pile, Nat had an expression on his face like someone asking for a thank you. Erik, cut, scraped and sore, couldn't quite bite back his angry comment.

“Cheers Nat, its great to know... that when I’ve got broken ribs... the best idea you’ve got for getting me out of a tree... is to shoot me out...”

“Ah fuck it, I’ve had a really bad day, and having you kick me in the head really didn’t help to make it much better.”

“Well, anyway, thanks... I don’t think I could have done that on my own.”

Nat’s indignant rejoinder had reminded Erik of their situation, and he carefully climbed to his feet. Finally getting a good look around, he began to realise just how badly things were looking. Surrounding them lay smoldering fuselage and scattered belongings. *Oh god... how did we survive that? Where is everyone else?*

*

“Hold still, damn you, or you’re going to end up with your hand sewn to your thigh.”

“I can’t help it... I’m afraid of needles, I don’t like bleeding, and I ARGH! I want you to stop poking... do you have to tug so hard on the thread?!”

“I’m sorry, but if I only half stitch you up, you’ll just fall apart in three steps. Try to hold still.”

“... urgh... well... could... do you think there’ll be enough thread to fix the hole in my pants?”

Exploring the wreckage, Nat and Erik had encountered a relatively undamaged first aid pack. Unfortunately, some of the more common medications like antibiotics and other useful things like bandages had been lost in the wreckage, or ruined. The antibiotics in particular were unrecoverable, with the bottle broken open and smeared in some rotten fungus material a few metres from the kit. A needle had remained sterile in a container though, and a pair of tweezers, and some alcohol wipes. An accident register form had also arrived to terra firma none the worse for wear. Erik had noticed some of Nat’s injuries, in particular a fairly deep cut in his hip, needed some form of attention, and had coerced him into receiving treatment. Instructing Nat to lie down, Erik had at first tried to distract Nat by getting him to jokingly fill out the accident form. He’d canned that idea the second he made his first needle thrust, and Nat had started beating him with the form to get him to stop. Now Nat lay down, alternating between whimpering and wiggling and sulkily conveying stoicism whilst wincing.

“So... oww. So when did you learn to do this kinda thing? I mean psych students don’t do the this do they?”

“Well, no... you’re gonna end up with a pucker on that if you keep wriggling so much. You know how you and Mike like to make rich kid jokes? Well... I did a

lot of camping when I was younger, guess I picked up a few things. And then I did about a year of med, before I switched to psych...”

“... are you, like, qualified...”

“Qualified to stitch your butt? Let me go get my degree in buttology. I’m sorry, no. Just a rank amateur here. But I’ll see what I can do. Unfortunately, I actually kinda left med because I wasn’t so hot on the stuff like this...”

“I’m... I can’t believe there wasn’t some anaesthesia in there.”

“I offered you the rock.”

“Yeah, no I don’t need you braining me just to stitch my OW ass thankyou.”

“Sorry, I’m only halfway done... here, try this, just bite down on it...it’ll probably help with the pain.”

Minutes passed, and Erik was putting in one of the last stitches when Nat hissed, and started to cough and splutter.

“What’s wrong?”

“cough wheeze gack Urk... heave... Nu...nuthin... spit I... I just bit through my stick, and got bark down my throat...”

*

With the wound finally closed, Erik slumped wearily to the ground. Nat, tenderly nursing his posterior, slowly climbed to his feet to limp around.

“Okay, so... you’ve seen no other survivors, right?”

“Well, there’s Mr Arm over there. So no, no other survivors.”

“Yeah, well apart from the arm, we’ve only got one known casualty, our pilot.”

“Yes, well, I found him okay... not that there was anything I could do.”

“So we need to find the guys.”

“Well... the guys might not be in much of a state to be found either, Erik. Maybe we should just sit here and wait for help.”

“Well, I don’t mind that idea, but we really need to find the guys. I just don’t think we can sit here... they might be nearby, and people might not come for days.”

“Uhm, if you’re sure. I thought you were supposed to stay with the wreckage? I... guess it’s okay...we can go look for the guys... if you insist.”

“I think it’s going to be for the best. I’d feel awful if they’re just nearby, hurt, and we just sat here.”

“You’re right... well, they’re really only going to be one of two places... behind us, or ahead of us, right?”

“I’m sorry, how do you figure that?”

“It’s simple. They aren’t here, right? So either they fell out behind us somewhere, so that puts them, well, more or less south of here. Not all of the wreckage landed here, so the tail might have come down behind us. Otherwise, if they made it down okay, they might have gone on to Quito, right? So we’ll either find them with the wreckage to the south, or they’ll go north.”

“Maybe we can get Will and Mike, like you said, maybe they’re just thrown by the crash.”

“... Mike anyway...”

“I’m sorry but look, that arm isn’t Will’s. It just isn’t. I don’t think you can say without a doubt that it is, either.”

The arm in question sat between them quietly belligerent, daring them to find its owner. Erik had already heard Nat's thoughts. There was a wedding ring, and a watch, neither of which were inscribed, but the ring ruled out anyone but Will and the pilot. Further confusing the issue was the fact that the pilot had no visible arms left, to speak of, leaving them nothing to compare it to. *It isn't Will's... it's just not...* Nat suddenly doubled over with a harsh cough, his face flushed with blood.

"How's the asthma? How can I help?"

"It's okay... yeah. Just the smoke. Controlled breathing makes it bearable. I probably can't stay here though, this smoke is getting to me."

"So we're agreed? You said it yourself, we can't stay here."

"If you're sure... this feels like a bad idea. I guess, you're right, we need to move, at least for a little while. Maybe if we hear a plane fly over, we can probably try to signal them or something..."

"And they aren't even going to start looking for at least a few hours, right? So there's no point in waiting here."

"Okay, I guess we'll both head south?"

“That idea sounds okay, but I’m just not sure we’ll ever find them like that. I think it might be for the best if we split up. You head south, and I’ll look around here and then head north.”

“I dunno... this doesn’t sound good...”

“Well, I think it’s the best plan. So now we’re breaking the fellowship, you’re looking for the hobbits, and I’m going onto Mount Doom...”

“And... what about him?”

Nat pointed at the arm lying between them.

“...”

“...”

“...”

“... you know... Frodo took the ring, man...”

“We can’t just take the ring.”

“What?”

“You heard me... what if... what if we find whoever this belongs to...”

“Like Will?”

“I’m sorry, but it is not Will’s. If we find whoever this belongs to... maybe we can get it re-attached.”

“If we find them...”

“But if we don’t find who it belongs to, I don’t know, maybe they’ll need it to identify a body, DNA or something. Maybe it’ll be recognizable to someone else, like the pilot’s wife or something.”

“Hey, maybe we’ll get hungry...”

“I didn’t hear that.”

“So, you think this hunk of meat is going to be something we need? I hear a lot of ifs and maybes, but... it’s a severed arm, whoever lost it, he isn’t going to be looking too healthy...”

“But there is a small, tiny, miniscule chance that arm might save someone’s life... and anyway, we can’t leave it here... it’s part of someone...”

“That’s great. You’ve rationalized this perfectly... he’s part of the family now.”

“Well, I don’t want to run around in the wilds of the jungle, wounded and carrying carrion either. But if we leave it here, it won’t be here when we get back. You know I’m right, that nothing short of keeping it close is going to keep it safe.”

“Well I’m not carrying it. Will isn’t going to need it...”

“Fine, damnit, fine, I’ll take the arm with me. Just so I can show it to Will and tell him what a dick you are. Happy?”

“Happy not to be taking the arm, yes. Hey... he can be your right hand man... oh, wait, scratch that.”

“Why did it have to be you? Anyone else would take this seriously.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll stop. Seriously though, do we have to split up?”

“There’s no other way to cover that much ground with two people quickly. I think it’s the best way. You limp south, I’ll go north. We’ll go out for a day. If we haven’t found survivors, yes, *OR bodies*, we head back. If I someone gets lucky and finds help, bring them back. Will you be okay with your asthma?”

“It’s fine... I need the clean air. And there just isn’t anything you can do for me anyway...”

“It’s settled then. We meet here in two days then, one day out, one day back. We’ll leave the guys a note, in case you miss them. So if they do make it here, they know where we are, right?”

“Yeah... good idea.”

That afternoon they had separated, Erik left Nat still writing the note, and started on a wide circle around the crash. *I can’t believe this is happening... I’m so sorry guys... but I’ll find you.*

Day 2.

It's horrible, just horrible. The plane crashed. I don't know where anyone else is, I've only got Nat here with me. I nearly suffocated, thrown into a tree when we crashed, pinned between its branches. Nat isn't too bad off, just a deep cut on his hip, I've stitched it up. But he found an arm, a severed arm. I don't know whose it is, but it's all my fault, I dragged them out here, and now one of them might be dead. One of them IS dead... I just don't know who. We've found the pilot's body, and he is in pretty bad shape, so maybe the arm is his. God I hope it is. Nat and I are going to separate, try to find help or other survivors, the plane came in low enough they might have made it. I keep hoping. We meet back here in two days, help or not.

Chapter 1: Will.

Will lay crumpled on the ground, a broken assembly of flesh and bone twisted into a mockery of human form.

There is no pain. I've died. I must have. I've died here, alone. I never knew death would be so peaceful. I don't miss my family, my friends. I know they're going on with their lives, and in the end, we'll meet again. But, why am I alone? Why has no one come, taken me away. I'm dead... shouldn't I move on? Why am I still here?

The ruined mass that was Will twitched.

Oh god no! I haven't died. Maybe I'm paralysed. I'm lying somewhere, paralysed. I've broken my neck... somehow. What's happened? Did I get shot? Maybe I fell out of bed or something. Dad always said I'd end up doing something stupid like that. "Don't bounce on that bed, son, or you'll slip and break your neck!" But... but, that's not right... how old am I? I'm not a kid. There'd be someone here, someone would be talking to me. There aren't any mums or dads here, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts. I am alone, here. Wherever here is. A hospital? They stick people with broken necks in hospital, into a metal HALO. I don't feel any metal... nothing is cold to the touch. Nothing is warm either. I can't smell anything, or hear anything. My god, I can't even see anything. Maybe I'm in a coma too. Maybe I'm locked in. Maybe falling out of bed, I've damaged my

brain, and now I'm locked in. I can't move, I can't feel... it's just me, me, alone, in here. No, don't panic... haven't even tried looking around.

Will's face strained, and slowly, he tried to open his eyes. Lying sideways with his head slightly elevated, Will managed to slowly separate his eyelids. As his eyes opened, the remaining symmetry of Will's face dissolved. On the right, a bold, bright blue eye blinked away at the dirt and dust and grime. On the left, the eye-socket collapsed and gushed vitreous humour between bloodied eyelids, dripping down the mangled flesh of a flayed cheek before wetly dripping into the earth below.

Why can I see that? What is that yellowy purply grey colour? Why is it over everything? Is that... is that because I've had a stroke? I must not be in good shape... all I see are colours that you can't see. And brown. Lots of brown. And green. And red. And that yellowy purply grey over everything, colouring everything. What a horrible colour. I'm seeing a world awash in yellowy purply grey. But... what hospital is brown? What hospital is red? And green? And no hospital is yellowy purply grey... Maybe, maybe I can see something else... what else is around? Where are my family? Where are my friends? No one would leave me alone here... why isn't there anyone else here?

Will's intact eye slowly looked around, while the muscles in his damaged socket made sympathetic movements, squeezing out more ruined tissue and aqueous humour. Will's focus went from a green plant, to the brown dirt beneath him, and then settled onto his feet. They were soaked in blood.

Oh god it hurts oh shit it hurts where the hell am I what is going on where did all that blood come from where can it have come from I don't have that much blood where am I cut where am I bleeding why can't I see properly where is everyone I'm all alone and there's blood soaking my feet but I'm not standing up I'm lying in it and its mine and I've bled it and I can feel cold and pain oh no oh shit pain in my back in my legs in my face oh my face it hurts so much and my nose is throbbing and my eye stings and my arm is burning and I can't move it and I'm lying in a pool of my own blood and it hurts.

Twitching and writhing, Will was suddenly and forcefully pushed fully alert and conscious. He tried to gather his thoughts and his body into a coherent whole, as pain flooded over him.

My bones are broken my legs aren't my chest is cracked and sore and stabbed and bleeding but my lungs are fine my heart is beating slow, so slow but its beating, and I'm cold now, oh so cold, maybe because my blood can't keep me warm, and even the blood I'm lying in is hard and cold, like the earth, and my face is covered in blood and my nose is broken and my ear is missing and my hands are... are... my arm, my left arm, my left arm is gone and its not here and its not there and its not on my shoulder but I'm not dead even though I should be dead because I'm missing my left arm and I'm bleeding everywhere.

Gagging, spitting blood, Will rolled to his side and used his right arm to slowly push himself upright. He feebly grabbed at his shirt, tearing, trying to pull

it loose, trying to find something that he could use as a bandage or tourniquet. Unable to tear the wet cloth of his shirt, Will clutched his hand to his shoulder, trying to stop the blood flowing down his left side.

There's no flow. There's only a trickle. I'm not bleeding out, I'm barely bleeding at all. I've lost a lot of blood, but I'm not bleeding like I should be, cos if I was bleeding like someone with a missing left arm I'd be dead already, if I'm cold already. But the stump, it's not bleeding right. It's burned. I'm cauterized, just like in that stupid Rambo film where he stuck gunpowder in his gut, I'm burnt and only a little bit of blood is seeping out between the cracks. But I didn't do it, there's no fire here, there's nothing burning around me and I'm... I'm in a jungle... or something. And I can't see right. Why can't I see right?

Will's right hand slowly pulled away from his severed shoulder, twitching spasmodically as he reached up to feel his face for the first time. His searching fingers touched the broken bones around his nose first, and wincing with pain, moved up to feel the cracked, collapsed edge of his face, checked that his ear was indeed missing, and then again moved to his eye-socket. Feeling dampness, Will pulled his hands away and tried to look at them. *That's clear... I can't see though... are those tears? Am I crying?* Moving back up to the left side of his face, Will's fingers pushed and probed, looking for an eye that was no longer there. Finding the open socket, exposed and empty, he gently at first, then desperately began to poke around, trying to find something that gave resistance. *Oh... oh no. That's my skull... my skull is cracked, and my eye is gone. And my*

finger is in my face. Oh god no. Crushed, physically and emotionally, Will slumped down, closed his eyelids, and waited to die.

*

*So this is the end. **Get up you shithead!** I didn't think it would be so easy to let go. **You're going to sit up, right now, and look around.** I thought that maybe if I didn't fight, someone else would fight for me. **You're not alone.** I thought someone would be with me. **I'm here with you... but I'm not the only one.** I have died... I just haven't stopped breathing yet. **You're alive, you need to listen.** All alone, mangled, broken, twisted. **Can't you hear it? Can't you feel it? There's something here with you.** I wish I could say I'd done something with my life. **There's still time, time to move.** I'd have liked to say goodbye. **Get up, get up, get UP now!** I've enjoyed life so far, bland as it's been. **It's after you, can't you hear that noise?** I've... I've... **I've gotta move.** I've gotta get up. **You've gotta get up. We've gotta get up.** But... but I'm weak... **and bloody... and cut and sore and soaked in blood. And tasty looking.** Oh shit, no. **Oh yes. You're not alone, not for long.** I'm not alone. Not for long. **You need to stand up, right now.** I've got to bandage myself. **We've got to move.** I'm a sitting duck. No one is coming for me, now... **No one good anyway. WE'VE GOT TO RUN.***

*

Will's eye flew open, and he climbed to his feet as quickly as he could. Frantically, he looked around, seeing bits and pieces of wreckage, but nothing

else. Around him, for the first time, he noticed the greenery. For some reason, he thought it should be jungles of ferns rather than forests of tall pines. It was late afternoon, and Will was shaking violently from the cold and the blood-loss. *Was it morning before... maybe?* Around him, cool mist had begun to roll in, gathering in smaller divots and ditches in the ground. Will carefully lifted his shirt off, crying out quietly as the coarse, blood stiffened fabric brushed over exposed nerve endings in his torn shoulder. There wasn't enough light to see, and seeing was more difficult than normal, but Will could make out that his shoulder was still bleeding where it wasn't burnt. Reaching into his pocket, Will found his keys, a lighter, some used tissues and some cough lollies. As carefully as his shaky fingers could, Will tried to remove the end of the lighter. *No luck... what are the odds.* Bringing the lighter up to his face, Will bit and chewed at the end until the wick and flint section separated from the gas well. Spitting the wick onto the ground in front of him, he grimaced in disgust. Foul lighter fluid dripped into his mouth. Working as quickly as he could, he soaked the flammable fluid into the tissues. Will carefully put the lighter down against a rock, and tried to cover his shoulder wound in the liquid. *If the snot doesn't kill me the septicemia will anyway, but maybe I'll last a little while.* Replacing the wick and flint into the lighter, Will took a deep breath.

Just like Rambo. Except he was an action hero... I'm just bleeding to death. Stuffing his blood soaked shirt into his mouth, Will reached down and grabbed the lighter before flicking the flint. *Once, twice...* He raised the flame to his shoulder, and tried to light the flesh. Misjudging the distance with his good eye, Will scorched the skin of his chest before finally igniting the fuel. *Sonofa...*

Will let out a loud scream, half muffled by the shirt in his mouth. He then spat out his shirt and frantically tried to beat out the flames before they spread. As the heat subsided, the haze of pain left Will's vision, returning it to a world of yellowy purple distortion. Will tried to lean against a tall pine tree and catch his breath, but misjudged the distance. He slid painfully across the trunk instead, falling solidly onto the bark before finding his balance. Shivering in spite of the burnt flesh, he pulled his shirt back slowly, and tied the left sleeve off as well as he could manage one handed. *I feel better. Crispier too. But I can walk for a bit. I have lost a lot of blood... but I'm not really losing any more. And I can still stand. It can't be much harder to walk. The pain is there, but it's keeping me awake. My legs aren't broken, only my ribs and my nose. I can still see shapes, if not shades. I can still hear on my right side... I heard my scream. I can't have been the only one.* A thought occurring to him, a smile crept onto Will's face. Reaching back into his pocket, Will again pulled out the cough lollies. *May as well bleed to death minty fresh... and this is better than blood and lighter fluid.*

It was then, with half a smile still on his face, that Will heard the cry. Loudly, close-by, a long, baying cry carried through the trees. *Something big... something near... something coming.* Weak, half blind, Will staggered into darkness.

Travel diary, entry 2.

I'm not sure what to say here. Things really haven't gone according to plan. Erik wanted us to keep a diary, and I'll honour my promise, and his memory, and do exactly that. This isn't the diary of our travels anymore, it is the diary of our disaster. I am alone, now. I am convalescing, being cared for by a local villager, so I'm going to try and fill in the gaps of the last few days while I rest. It began with the plane crash. At least I think it was a plane crash. All I know is I woke up, alone, and really really hurt. I couldn't move my arm... I was delirious. Somehow, in my head, I convinced myself that I had lost it. But I'm looking at it right now, so you figure it out. Anyway, I was alone, in the Amazon jungle. So I did what I could, patched myself up. I don't know why...

Chapter 1: Mike.

Damn, it's cold. Walking alone, at night, through the jungle...not just cold, but lonely. There's no other voices, no calls in the night, just the sounds of the jungle; alien, and remote. Peaceful, but still with a threatening air at the same time. My kind of night.

Shivering, Mike hunched his shoulders in the face of the wind, pushed his hands deeper into his trench-coat's pockets, and stalked, square-jawed and stone-faced into the wind.

There is something about this place. It doesn't matter where I wander, it all looks the same. There's no sights in the wild, not at night. Just shades of grey. And in the dark patches, things best avoided. No use looking too hard in the jungle at night... the things you don't want to meet can see you much better than you can see them anyway. Just stick to the beaten track, head down, feet forwards, and watch out for puddles. Damn, I need a cigarette.

Mike stopped, resting against a nearby lamppost. It swayed slightly under his weight, creaking like old wood. Leaning his back into the wind, Mike dug into his pockets looking for a book of matches. He pulled a cigarette from a beaten up case in his breast pocket, and struggled to nurse a flame from his vaguely damp matches, cursing under his breath as first one then another snapped when he tried to light them.

Walking at night is also hell on matches, especially when it rains. Third time's the charm...

A brief flare sprang from the third match, enough to half light the cigarette sagging from Mike's wind-chilled face. Breathing deeply, Mike looked up and smiled. Looked up at the yellow street light above him, and beyond that, the skyscrapers and townhouses. Looked up and saw that the sky had a mean vermillion streak tracing through the dark black clouds. Looked up and saw the rain starting to fall between the towers and buildings of the city. Illuminated under the unnatural yellow glow from above. The rain fell slick and heavy, soaking into Mike's coat and pants before trickling down the back of his neck and pooling around his shoes. *Stormy...* Mike slammed one hand onto his hat, flailed the other over his rapidly soaking cigarette and dashed into an alley to wait out the downpour.

Three days. They should have been here three days ago. Will, Jon and Erik. They were flying in, from all over. It was going to be a get together. My flight got diverted, so I caught a cab from the jungle strip where I landed and drove into town... went to the hotel, just like we said we would. There was no note, nothing suggesting anything had gone wrong. Half remember hitting the minibar pretty hard. Woke up the next afternoon, still shit-faced, but much happier for it all the same, and still no one had turned up. Step over the broken glass, shoes aren't good enough for that kinda grief. Hotel staff hadn't heard anything, anything besides me at 4am, singing to the porcelain God anyway. Very nice of them to restock the minibar before I woke up. So here I am, they're all

missing... new town, no connections... clueless... and my head still scrambled like an egg. Airport said they arrived, and that's the last time anyone saw any of them. Somewhere, they got misplaced. Now this is day three, and no one has seen or heard a thing. And no one gives too much of two shits, either. Except me. Don't have enough friends to misplace nearly all of them in one afternoon... not too great for my image, either.

Mike trudged on through the streets, dodging from cover to cover as the downpour went from heavy to torrential. *Gotta love the tropics. At least the wind's died down. Someone needs to find these guys... it's what I do. May as well be me. Watch the broken path. Three people just up and vanish in a busy city like this, no one is gonna notice. Lucky for them I'm just here and waiting. It's always nice when work comes on holiday.*

*

If anyone asked, Mike would tell them he had something of a reputation in his line of work. On the rare occasions someone asked him what he did for a living, he replied, "I'm a detective". But in reality, he thought of himself as something more of a freelance thinker. With a gun. He'd had all the vices, smoking, drinking, an eye for the ladies. Anyone who spent hours a day with a camera in hand, a trench-coat on his back sitting in a bush really needed a certain affinity for the ladies. Unlike most though, Mike hadn't fallen from grace into his job, he'd clawed his way up to it instead. It started innocently enough...he'd considered detective work to be a nice cover, helping him conduct activities that

were generally frowned upon. The quasi-legal status afforded the detective had intrigued him, and as long as he could find a client, he presumed he could find a way to make a little money on the side. It was amazing what found its way into his pockets while he was working. As long as they didn't belong to a client, things were peachy... far easier to charge them twice as much for his time, and keep the profits off the books. And blackmail to a detective is a misnomer... it's not blackmail if you are only the one to find something out... and it's not your deal if the client uses it to some end of theirs. And as long as he got paid, Mike assured himself it was all just part of the job.

To his way of thinking, Mike had taken the petty criminal he'd once been, and honed him into a dogged detective. A man with the determination to see a job through to the end, no matter what. Over the years, Mike had come to be more discerning with the jobs he took. He took less dubious jobs, and he charged more to do them. He tried to find work to make up for his past transgressions; never for free, but never for more than someone could afford. He'd started tracking down lost family members, helped one or two families out with murdered relatives, and had even once rescued a prominent figure's daughter from a fat serial pedophile rapist. Basically, he'd made himself legit. The end still justified the means, but the end wasn't the money anymore. It was the self respect. After that, his clientele had started to pick up... a few higher profile jobs that paid well enough to get an office with his name on the door... and with enough change to keep the booze cabinet fully stocked. He'd never given up on the camera work though... he had a reputation to tarnish, and damned if he could ever turn down the opportunity to

take a few happy snaps of couples in love. Bread and butter in his trade, catching the salami in the salad sandwich always paid the rent.

This was the fiction of Mike's life, the delicate fabric that helped him function in the real world, the context upon which he placed every story, every experience, and particularly every action.

The truth wasn't anywhere near as "exciting".

Mike hadn't ever been a criminal. That didn't stop him from trying to style himself as one however. He acquired bachelor's degrees in behavioral psychology and English. Finally, the time had arrived for Mike to hit the real world. It was then that he realized he had no idea what he wanted to do. Mike weighed his pros and cons: Great with conspiracies. Not great with office hours. Had his own camera. Didn't know how to use much else. Convincing liar and passable judge of character. Possibly the least connected human being to ever hold a psychology degree. Average shot with a gun, and some boxing skills. Incredibly bad back, rooted for heavy lifting. With his scholarly background, in particular fiction and crime, Mike saw two career paths. Crime novelist, or detective. Thankfully for the world of fiction, he had chosen detective work. Writers didn't get to carry the gun, and in the end, it was about the image for Mike.

*

Resolutely, Mike continued walking. At every street corner, Mike's brow furrowed in hesitation. *They're like trails in the jungle, this one leads under a tree, that one around a rock... nothing is ever clear cut, nothing is ever concrete...* His stride never betrayed this hesitation however, as he walked swiftly and powerfully down street after street, only to casually stop from time to time to re-light his cigarettes or shake water from his hat and coat.

The jungle... my jungle. I can't look weak here... not here of all places. I prowl at night, just like the wild animals. I prowl swiftly, surely. Because to hesitate here... that's asking for trouble. At 3a.m. in a strange city, walking at night past dark alleys and in a heavy downpour, it's a little too easy to get into trouble. Got no gun, but what good would it be with a knife in my back or a crowbar through my hat? Gotta keep walking. Gotta start piecing this together. The guys, they'd have come in together... the last leg of their flight put them on the plane, together. Christ, they were even sitting together, airport told me that much. So where could they go? Well, it's not like they'd all run off and leave me behind. So something in the jungle got to them first. Dodge the puddle. One of the big cats, maybe. But why? What would three rubbernecks have that'd be of interest to a big cat? They're not fresh meat... not many brothels hire native English speaking males to fill the ranks. They're not... left turn, back towards the nightlife... prey, or hunters, not crims or coppers. Erik is wealthy, I suppose, but he doesn't exactly walk around with a monocle and top hat... guess it's enough to make him a viable hostage though... but then why no note, no contact? Why take the others? Had they just gotten in the way?

Mike had already tentatively approached the cops, and had met the firm, unyielding response of “We’ll look into it”. He’d told them his line of work, and that he’d be making independent enquiries. They’d told him he wasn’t licensed in this city, and that anything he discovered had to be brought to them immediately. They asked if he carried a gun... he had said quite truthfully no. He then mentally amended that no with, “I don’t carry it, it sits in a holster”. *The best lies are based on truth, after all.* They’d exchanged contact details, theirs being of the 3 digit variety. Mike had then gone off to the morgue, just to be sure no D.O.A.s had come in with his friend’s faces on them. He had then gone on to try and find anything at the hospitals. That was this afternoon, and ever since he had been walking a beat that he didn’t patrol, as much looking for his friends as he was trying to organize his thoughts.

But maybe, maybe it’s not Erik. He’s wealthy, but hardly famous for it or anything. So what else were the guys good for? Drugs? Were they mules? I wouldn’t put it past Jon... shifty eyed bugger. Stop at the lights, wait for the truck. Will and Erik are way too gutless for that though. Guess they could have just been unlucky... good ol’ baggage handler jiggery pokery could have put anything in there. But they weren’t flagged at customs... so if that was it, they could have walked out of the airport with anything... watch the puddle... urgh.

Wetly shaking out his shoe, Mike resolutely strode off into the night.

Was it a bird? A plane? No! It's super diary!

Well shit. I think somebody forgot to check something when we took off from the airport. Bags? Check. Passengers? Check. Nibbles? Check. The fucking plane? Oh well shit, we left that one behind, silly fucking us. But don't worry, the diary made it through, safe and sound! I don't know what the fuck happened. I woke up smeared along the landscape, face full of dirt. It's raining, well, on and off, otherwise how the hell would I write in this thing? It's dark. I see a little bit of burning rubble... otherwise, jungles-a-plenty. Which is wonderful, really, seeing as how I'm Tarzan, king of the fucking jungle animals. I'm going for a walk... those bastards have to be around here somewhere. Time to do a little sleuthing.

Chapter 2: Jonathon.

“You limp south, I’ll go north...”

This thought echoed through Jonathon’s mind as he painfully limped through the jungle.

“You limp south, I’ll go north...” So what the hell do I do...? I limp south... and then what? I’m not even sure how far south I can go. I am tired already, and it’s only been a few hours. I’m not going to get far if I keep having to rest. And what do I do if I find the guys, anyway? If they’re alive, they’re probably not in much better shape than me, probably a lot worse even. I can’t stitch them up, don’t know how. I didn’t even bring the stupid first aid kit. I guess maybe I could make a splint and some bandages or something, but maybe not. And then we’ve got to limp back through the jungle. And... and if they’re gone... then what? I can’t carry even one of them back, let alone two of them. If Mike is okay, maybe he and I could carry Will back...a little way. But no hope if it’s the other way around. Maybe, maybe I could make some kinda drag-stretcher, tug them along... if they’re dead, they’re not going to be much worse for wear from that, but if they’re not... either way, no guarantee I’m gonna be able to take them anywhere back with me.

A muscle spasm in his hip pulled Jonathon short, mid stride. He was worried that all this walking would tear the stitches in his hip, and each new step seemed to confirm his dire premonition. Leaning against a tree to get a better

angle, Jonathon gingerly lifted the torn denim of his jeans aside and looked at his wound. To his surprise and relief he found that the stitches were holding, even though the two sides of flesh looked puckered and inflamed. There was seepage, only a little bit of blood, and even that was old and dried. Sighing, taking any excuse to let himself take a rest, Jonathon leant against the tree for a few moments more before beginning his painful trudge south again.

“You limp south, I’ll go north...” What the hell sort of idea is that? Suuuure we need to find the guys...suuuure we need to find a town. But is me limping through the damn jungle going to get that done? Not bloody likely. Shoulda done it my way... I shoulda made him. I really don’t wanna be here on my own. So far, these stitches are holding... but how long will they hold? It’s not like they get people with stitches in them and make them walk for hours on end, to stress test them...and then what? Bleed quietly and wait for help? Damned if I’ll get far if they tear open...if they go now I may as well sit on the ground and wait.

Pushing through some thick foliage, unable to find a path big enough or long enough to reliably follow southwards, Jonathon had added to his list of cuts and scrapes. He was grateful however that his melted boots had held up so far, as he once again unintentionally stepped heavily onto loose shoal that was inexplicably lying under some ground coverage. Slipping slightly, pulling again at his inflamed hip, Jonathon hissed in pain and paused momentarily, then pushed on, lifting aside two giant tree fronds and ducking underneath them.

“You limp south, I’ll go north...” he says. Limping being the operative word there. And wheezing. And then I get to limp back of course. Probably wheezing then too. Cheers, thanks for the workout Erik... but I don’t really need it. And what the... can every insect in this jungle smell that I’m bleeding or something, cos I haven’t seen this many flies hanging around something living before...or it’s not me...

Jonathon tried sniffing the air, but only managed to make snuffling noises. The dirt from the crash had made his nose block up, and he was still having trouble clearing it out well enough to smell anything. *If there’s flies... maybe there is a body here... supposed to be able to smell a body really well... but I can’t smell anything...* Jonathon slowly limped his way up a small hill, hoping from his higher vantage point to see whatever was attracting the flies. Slipping a few times, falling to his knees with a painful cry once, he managed to scramble up the gentle incline of loose soil and soft groundcover. Looking around, he couldn’t see anything out of the ordinary at first. Then, slightly to his left, laying under a bush a few metres away, he saw a snake. Or at least the remains of one. *Brr...* Jonathon shuddered at the sight of the thing, nearly running straight back down the hill, until he noticed the wounds. The snake looked like it had been in a fight, deep gouges along its head and front portions. Bleeding heavily, and with its protective layer of scaly skin torn open, flies and other scavenger insects were making a meal of the flesh underneath. Writhing still, Jonathon assumed the snake had recently been killed... until it looked at him and raised its head, slowly trying to move. Towards him or away didn’t matter, he shuddered again and backed down the hillock as quickly as possible. As he backed down, something glinted in his

field of view, before disappearing out of sight as he half slid half walked hurriedly away.

“You limp south, I’ll go north...” ... and get eaten by undead snakes. I know this is the Amazon jungle... I know there are snakes in here...no one said they’d be looking at me. I thought it’d be something I saw from the back of a jeep. And how long was that thing? 3 metres if I’ve ever seen em. And as fat around as my arm. Surprised Jon Voight wasn’t inside, winking at me. Damn I hate snakes... brrrrr.

Jonathon started walking south again, giving the hillock and its reptilian occupant a wide berth *I’ll leave you plenty of room to die there on snake mountain, in peace, you scaly...* Pausing mid-step, mid thought, a thought hit Jonathon. *That was metal! The shiny thing in the distance, maybe its part of the plane!* Jonathon set off quickly, heading towards where he thought the shine had reflected from, traversing a little closer to the injured reptile than he was really comfortable with, but unwilling to risk getting even further from where he thought the reflection had come from. Moving along at a half-limp, half-run pace, Jonathon again caught the glint of reflected light, coming from slightly to the right of where he was. He adjusted his path and headed towards it.

What the hell else could it be, anyway? I guess..... I guess this is the jungle, and they’re always talking about loggers in the Amazon jungle... maybe it’s a logger’s camp, or a bulldozer or something. Can’t hear it ripping trees down, I don’t hear any saws or anything, maybe there’s no one there... still, no

one parks a bulldozer in the middle of the jungle and just leaves it there forever. Heh... a bulldozer would be damn handy about now, plow my own damn path through the trees...

Jonathon kept heading towards the glint, which became more and more pronounced. At the same time it was becoming less and less explicable. It didn't appear to be coming from a clearing, yet it was quite a large object. It seemed uniform, but from the general shape he could see from the distance, it appeared far too angular to be a piece of plane wreckage, or anything else he'd seen before. It appeared to be reflecting yellow light, rather than just painted metal, which didn't seem quite right. As he caught a glimpse of it between some branches shifting in the breeze, Jonathon thought he saw a point on the top of it.

Finally having made his way through the dense jungle, Jonathon caught his first full glimpse of the object. He had encountered something that looked a lot like a giant crystal, not metal at all. Six sided, it indeed came to a point a meter above Jonathon's head, and seemed like it might go at least that deep into the ground below. Walking around it slowly, Jonathon couldn't see any markings of any sort, just the six smooth sides. Translucent, Jonathon could see diffused light coming through, but deep in the centre of its mass was a dark, indistinct area, and for a second Jonathon thought he saw a flicker of electricity sparking through the darkness. *Maybe its some weather experiment or something... big computer inside, recording electromagnetic fields and ambient temperatures and rainfall and stuff as it hits this daft looking thing.* It was cool to the touch, and the edges on the side weren't sharp, but instead rounded off slightly. *I wonder if this was*

dug up...it can't just be something that's just here... man made maybe? Jonathon tried to tap on the object, and then to thump, but no matter what he did, he still couldn't tell if the object was hollow. *Maybe its not crystal... its almost like really smooth metal...shiny, smooth, but not hollowed out... maybe its some tribal relic or something, some big old rock that was shaped smooth and then left in the elements... blown and washed smoother again maybe... but it's still so clean cut. It has to be man made.*

“Man made then... but how would you get it open?”

A quiet, metronomic noise sounded, accompanied by a deep thrumming sensation carried through the object, causing Jonathon to quickly pull his hand away in surprise. The noise faded as soon as his hand broke contact. Backing away, curious more than afraid, Jonathon momentarily forgot about his injuries, even his friends. Instead, he was overcome with a desire... a desire to see the inside... a desire to touch the object again, to explore it. He raised his hand and touched the surface again; found it thrumming still, the noise only audible when he was in contact with the object.

“Come to me... come home, to me.”

Trailing his fingers along the sides, he limped slowly around, looking for any change in the surface. *It is crystalline! Shining so bright... not just reflected light, but actually... actually creating it. It's so... beautiful. I... its incredible... this thing.* Small blue sparks trickled along Jonathon's fingers now, as he dragged them along the smooth surface. As the hairs on his arm electrified, the sparks

began to flash higher up his arm. Rather than burning, everywhere they touched, the sparks left tiny tickling sensations.

“You must answer my call... come home to me.”

Having finally walked around to the other side of the object, Jonathon saw a area glowing brighter than the rest. Tentatively reaching his other hand up to the glow, worried it might burn him, Jonathon instead closed an electrical circuit, and without time for another thought, he found himself suddenly inside the now transparent crystalised object, staring out, through unblinking eyes.

Oh, wow... trees... they're so old now... and... and gone! The sky! It's burning... gone... Where are the clouds? And... the ground...it's so dry... where are the animals? Where is everything? What's happened? It's so empty. I... I feel it. Older. And then younger again... it's cyclical... young old young old...maybe it's trying... trying to keep me as near to normal as it can, this thing.

Suddenly, Jonathon found his view obscured... cloudless sky and barren landscapes and even the crystalline glow replaced by empty space, and four walls.

“Finally... finally you've come. Come home to me.”

November 2nd

Okay, so today I was supposed to head back to the wreckage if I didn't find something. It'd be easy enough, I've left a gruesome Hansel and Gretel-esque trail in my own blood, so odds are pretty good I could get back. But I have found something... not our friends, although I thought I was on to something there too. It's a jeep... and I'm going to wait here... maybe whoever owns it will be back soon, and they can help me. Erik is just going to have to wait... damn, he's never going to forgive me for leaving him out there.

Thought for the day: When you meet a giant, undead, Thalsa-Doom as a snake type thing, it's very hard not to wish for a giant zweihander and Conan-esque muscles. Or even a big cannon. Give wildlife a wide berth, it hates you anyway.

Chapter 2: Erik.

Man, it's really hard to walk alone in the jungle without singing, "In the jungle" ...don't you think?

Erik adjusted the bundle under his arm.

... oh no, don't worry guys, he's mostly 'armless...

Erik had only been walking for four or five hours now, long enough he hoped for some of the shock to have worn off, but he was concerned that he wasn't handling things well. It was the arm. He'd wrapped it up in a ripped jacket scavenged from the wreckage and stuffed it tightly to keep it sealed. On one hand, Erik didn't want to leave it, thinking that it might be a key to identifying one of his friend's bodies. He wasn't sure that just a watch and a ring were really going to be enough to convince any authorities he encountered. But the problem was, he couldn't really accept that the arm belonged to anyone he knew, it was more like carrying a fake arm. Rather than just ignoring it, Erik found himself instead joking with the arm, talking to the arm, anything to ignore the frightening implications of having it.

"Wave to the crowd, your majesty."

Despite being a little on the rank side of aromatic, the arm itself wasn't too much of a burden. Erik tried not to smile when he thought about carrying an arm

under his arm, despite knowing deep down it really wasn't very funny. ...okay, so it's a little bit funny... but not, well, why am I laughing about it? What do you think, Ming? Erik had not only named the arm, but had revised that name several times to match the arm's personified character. It had started out as Mr Arm, then Thing, until Erik realized that Thing was probably a bit more active, and a lot less stiff. Next, it had become Meat with Fingers, in honour of bad Kevin Costner movies. Erik rationalized that Meat with Fingers probably wouldn't have had much of a role in Dances with Wolves, so he'd shortened it to Mingers. Mingers had worked fine for Erik, it sounded colloquial and jocular, like a drinking buddy's name. Of course, that was before Erik had realised Mingers' dark side.

Erik and Mingers had stopped for a brief rest a few hours out, and Erik had put Mingers down on a tree trunk. Mingers had been caught in a gust of wind and rolled off into the bush. This had been the beginning of a new set of gags for Erik, with Mingers attempting escape at every opportunity. Erik had even put Mingers down on the floor once or twice and turned his back, just to see if something might happen. On the most recent attempt, Erik discovered that Mingers was covered in ants. Shaking the jacket out, and cursing the ants that were biting him, Erik accused Mingers of being merciless in his escape attempts. This had conjured a new image for Erik, of Mingers the Merciless, ruling his ant army, seeking to thwart the noble Erik and escape into the dark of the jungle. Mingers became Ming, Erik became Flash Erik, and around him, the world spun.

"You may rule your antsy minions with an iron fist, Ming... but you will rue the day you ever crossed Flash Erik!"

As he became tired from walking, Erik started talking less to Ming, and concentrated more on his surroundings. It'd been long enough now that he was hungry and thirsty. Whether from dehydration or starvation or various concussive blows to his head, Erik found that his vision was blurred and he thought he might have begun to hallucinate. At first, Erik had stumbled across a flower, a lone flower, sitting under a bush. It wasn't growing there, hadn't fallen from a nearby plant as far as Erik could tell, but there it was all the same. It appeared to be luminescent, a brilliant shade of vermillion, with traces of other colours along the stamen, like a prism. Erik had stared at the flower for a full minute before reaching out to touch it, only to find it was no longer there. Ignoring Ming's mocking laughter, Erik had continued on his way, but more and more, he noticed flora and fauna that didn't fit in with his vision of the Amazonian rainforests. Eventually Erik came to a stream, and while the brackish water didn't do much for his thirst initially, Erik's survival skills told him that a little more salty water now might help him conserve what little he had for later on. Taking a moment to wash Ming's few ant minions away, and dull the ringing in his skull with a refreshing splash of water, Erik contemplated his next move.

Well... I've stopped talking to Ming. That's something. The trees aren't wobbling anymore. Also something. I still keep seeing the strange flowers, but as long as I'm not chasing them around, that might not be too bad. I still know which way north is, I'm feeling a little more rested, and a lot more refreshed. It'll be a few more hours before I have to consider stopping for the night, and maybe I can make myself a spear, so the next time I cross a river or body of water I can try for

some fish. Things are looking up. I'm okay... it's just dehydration. I'm not too bad off, the gouges in my back have stayed closed. I'm not really delirious, it's just one weird flower. Okay Ming, it's time to go.

Sighing, Erik picked Ming up, and headed on.

*

The sun was beginning to dip in the sky to Erik's left when he first noticed the wispy trails of fog amongst the plant-life. *Must be the moisture in the soil and air, combined with the sudden temperature drop... guess it's going to be pretty cold here tonight.* Continuing on, the fog thickened, so much so that Erik began to fear he was having trouble with his vision again. Stopping to look around, he noticed that the fog was directly to his north only, seemingly gathering in a lower lying area of land. Directly behind him there were only thin wisps along the ground. Unwilling to try and sidestep the fog, for fear he would become even more disoriented on his return trip, Erik pushed slowly into the chill mist. Walking carefully, paying more attention to the ground directly under his feet than what lay ahead, Erik was at first unaware of the change in the environment around him. While Erik looked down, above him, the vines and trees of the jungle gave way to an area that seemed to be more like woodland. With a start, Erik's were drawn to another small, luminescent, prismatic flower.

Erik stopped as soon as he saw the vibrant flower, and hesitantly reached out to touch it. His hands shaking, he slowly extended his fingers to within an

inch of the vibrant petals, only to hurriedly close his hand into a fist and snatch it away. *I've... I haven't seen anything odd for hours... I was fine. I don't need this... I don't see this. Why prove it? I can ignore it, and walk on. I'm fine, everything is fine... that flower may or may not be there, but damned if I need to touch it to be sure. Of course it is there... I'm not imagining it, because there's nothing wrong. Everything is fine...* Shaking, partially from the chill of the fog that now completely blanketed the surrounding land, and partially from the shock of encountering another impossible flower, Erik leaned against a tree, and slowly slumped down to the ground, closing his eyes and trying not to let himself panic.

"Heeeeeeyy"

"Heeeeeey, laeddie! Canye hear me!"

And now I'm imagining voices... that's bad. I've got to be really dehydrated...what else could it be?

"Hey! Laeddie! Areye dead? Open yer fekkín eyes if yer nadead!"

Slowly, Erik opened his eyes. In the mist, he could barely make out a figure, waving frantically at him, and seemingly coming towards him. Resisting the urge to wave Ming in response, Erik instead pulled himself upright, stood up, and squinted into the fog.

Damned if I'm answering my illusions... but... maybe...maybe its one of the guys, messing around. I mean, who else is out in the jungle, alone, looking for people? Whoa, no one I know is that short! What? A kid? No...

Erik was finally convinced he was delirious, when he saw walking towards him, what appeared to be a stout man with a full beard. Who it seemed stood at a full 3 and a half foot tall.

“Ye better be dead, bastard! Standing there lewkin me like dat, no sayin a word o naught.”

“I... I'm sorry, but I don't mean to be rude. Um, you are a tiny little... um, dwarf aren't you?”

“Aye”.

“And you do sound just like a Scotsman, right?”

“... I dunnae Laddie, does a Scotsman hae a clear and purcise langage, unlike the shite yer spoutin nae? Never hearded of nae Scotsmansland, ifn that's yer ask.”

“Ahh. So... what do you think, Ming, are we flying over any cuckoo's nests right now?”

“...Listen, laed, I dun give two rats bullocks about where’n yer from, what’n yer doin, and what have ye. I’ve an ask for ya... have ya hearded the limerick of the conquerin common?”

“What? I’m sorry... no... I don’t think I can remember any limericks. Not off the top of my head. Should I know any?”

“Aye, laed, ye should. Tis said that ye’d be here’n’now, and tis the wisdom o knowin dat, tis why I’m here. So listen clearly, dun plan on repeatin naught, and den I’m on me way outta dis forsaken bit of dragons smoke.”

Bemused, confused, and disbelieving, Erik sat on the wet ground and gestured with Ming for his imaginary diminutive friend to continue. Clearing his throat, which involved a motion so volatile as to fling his beard over his nose, the dwarf began to stamp out a beat with his foot before chanting his limerick.

“Thogh boorn wilthy auf koyn and feeseek
Thee Twixed shael yit appeer waek
Fo withaught the Vale
Twill naught avail
Laeving Kings and Sultans to weep.”

“Who’s wealthy? I don’t have my own money!”

“I dunnae care, laed. Thaese are the wurdz I was learned from a babe, and was tael'd tae bring here'n'now, for the wisdom aught be passed unto ye, laed. Dunnae furget aye?”

“Riiight... okay. Well... I thank you, strange Mr Dwarf person. Now can you kindly disappear back to wherever I imagined you from, and let me be delirious on my own?”

“Hmph! Wael, dere ain't nae leavin Dyfed's miasma, this is borderland, ye'r here, so ye'r stayin. Iaem done, to Hael with ye.”

Erik appeared to have offended the dwarf, for with a rude gesture he turned and began to blow a piercing whistle. The sound didn't carry far, but Erik didn't have much faith in what he heard right now anyway. He did fall back in surprise though, when a giant bird cut through the mists and landed heavily next to the dwarf. Standing a full seven foot tall, stood a massive bird. Pale feathers highlighted with brilliant plumage of orange, red, blue ran along its length, and right near the long sharp beak stood a few startling white feathers. Erik thought he could see tiny flames along its ankles and wingtips, barely visible through the mists.

“Erm... is that a phoenix?”

“Faenix? Nay... this is Duergus Aodh-Badb.”

“Oh I’m sorry, uhh... nice to meet you... Gus.”

The bird turned to peruse Erik briefly before preening itself. Erik leant close to the dwarf and whispered in his ear.

“Is it supposed to be, well, you know, on fire?”

“Oh aye, surely, lets douse the par wee thing, and we’ll both freeze in the guthrie, aye?? Cannae ya see the wee saddle, tis for riding swift...”

Erik belatedly noted the leather saddle that was tied around the gigantic avian, and could only watch in bemusement as the irritable dwarf struggled his way into the saddle, made another rude gesture, and then flew off to the north in a gust of wind and a wake of ash. Sitting heavily on the ground again, Erik tried halfheartedly to joke.

“Well Ming, maybe I should start calling you BraveMing...”

Erik again caught sight of the strange vermillion and rainbow pigmented flower. Reaching out again, he carefully pulled it from under the bush, and lifted it to his nose. It smelled like nothing on Earth. *Damn, this is much worse than delirium.*

Day 3.

I've found someone, a villager. I tried for over half an hour to talk to him, but he kept speaking in his native tongue, so I assume we can't communicate. He then ran off into the jungle again, and before I could follow him he was gone. Damn it. At least it wasn't like the French, I'm pretty sure this guy didn't ACTUALLY know English. It's getting late, I'm going to have to head back soon, but I think I'll try pushing on just a little further, the guy had to come from a village or something, and he was on foot, so it can't be far away.

Chapter 2: Will.

Dusk had fallen, and still Will kept moving. Even after what felt like hours of staggering through the forest, weak and unsteady from blood loss, Will kept moving. He was certain he was being chased, certain he couldn't stop. *Not for breath, not for rest. If I stop I've given up.* His ruined body screamed at him, lactic acid eating away at skeletal muscle as Will tried again and again to stay ahead of his pursuer. The anaerobic exercise left his muscles starved of oxygen, and while slowing alleviated his pain, it was increasing his anxiety. Fear drove him to again try and increase his pace. Another stagger, a tree slashing painfully across his face, and his feet finally caught the ground evenly. Will wasn't aware of any of this however, running on automatic; he was focused only on what would happen if he stopped.

Staggering through the jungle wildly, fleeing from something he didn't believe he could escape, Will was just trying to hold on. *I can't give up...* The continual exercise, combined with the jarring motion of his pace across the uneven ground had caused Will's shoulder wound to bleed anew. Bandaged and burned or not, he was losing blood again through his shoulder. Blood that made his chest and back slick; blood that mixed with his sweat and created an overpowering coppery tang. Even now, Will felt himself growing faint. As he started to black out he lost his footing on uneven soil, and slammed heavily into a thick bole. Will caught himself with his right arm. Frantically scraping pieces of bark off, he fought to keep himself upright. Will slid around the trunk, obviously trying to continue. Behind him, along the trunk of the tree were several bloody

prints. Where his hand had scrabbled, Will's torn fingernails had thinly sprayed dark blood over the bark. Another stain spread in a ruddy speckled area, Will having involuntarily spat up hemorrhaging blood that flecked the tree as he gasped for air. Finally a bright red trail marked where Will's shoulder had scraped briefly across the stump. Will staggered upright, and started moving ahead; the brief respite of hitting the tree had given him enough for a few more steps.

It's close... so close. I can feel it. It's not going to stop... never going to stop. Well... too damn bad... I'm dead anyway... you want me, you find me. I'll bleed to death somewhere... better than letting you have me. I'm already dead, and that's the only thing you want anyway. So you know what? Too damn bad... too damn bad for you... I'll die... die my own way. I tried... I survived something most people don't... I fixed myself up as best I could...didn't even find my arm. But that's not what you want... you don't just want a piece of me. Couldn't just nibble on my arm... and... whatever is left... of the others... no... you want me. Fine. Come and get me. Haven't caught me yet, you son of a bitch. Damn you.

Will felt adrenalin again surge through his system... adrenalin that he didn't think he had left... just like every other time he'd come close to stopping. Whenever exhaustion and pain, or a collision, or clumsily tripping over had nearly forced him to a stop, a hand had pushed into his chest, and tightly grabbed his heart... squeezing it, making it beat faster, making him scream out in pain and fear and rage, making him push his legs down harder, swing his arm faster, made his pupils dilate and his teeth bare and his hair stand on end. Each time, Will thought it would be the last, the last desperate push of his fight or flight response,

the last time he would have the energy. Each time, he had to resist the urge to turn around, to confront whatever was chasing him, and instead push what little energy he had gained into covering ground, sprinting instead of running, dodging instead of colliding, breathing deeply instead of panting futilely. Because he knew that turning around wasn't an option, turning around was as good as giving up. He'd seen something in his seeker, something he knew he could never beat. Just glimpses, as the chase had gone on, but he had seen a blurred shape, and fur, and wicked long claws, and once, out of the corner of his eye, sunlight gleaming off what seemed to be gigantic canines, a grin for his benefit, a grin from a head that while indeterminate, appeared to be big enough to swallow him whole.

You want me to know... don't you? Son of a bitch... want me to see what you are, how you're hunting me. I don't care... giant monster thing, all fur and teeth and claws. Bear, great cat, whatever. Yeah... you're big... but I'm small... smaller than you. I can... I can slide places you have to... to go around, over. And soon...has to be soon...I'm going to find... find a place. Some place you can't fit... some place you won't follow. Some place where you won't get me. I'm dying... but kiss my ass, cos you aren't gonna get me. Chase me as long as you like... you can't have me... bastard...

“...I'm not dinner...”

Will coughed up more blood as he ran, tried to spit it out of his mouth, only to have it trickle down his cheek instead. Seemingly in response to his defiant whisper, a mocking howl rose up from behind him, so close he could

almost imagine the hot breath on his neck. Will twisted his head to get a better view of the path that lay ahead, a path that was becoming increasingly harder to see as dusk settled into night. With his left eye gone, Will had to constantly turn his head and use his right eye to compensate, trying to see obstacles that lay on his left side. When he had first started to move, Will had not been aware of the blindside, not until he slammed into a tree he hadn't seen, chipping a tooth and smashing his already damaged skull solidly into the tree. Since then, he had learned to partially offset his injury. Regrettably, the darkness had crept over him, and wrapped him in its thick, chill cloak. Will found he was having more trouble spotting obstacles. He couldn't interpret the depths of objects at night properly, kept ducking under branches that weren't near, only to bob up and smash into them directly. Kept stepping into ditches he thought were a few steps ahead, jarring his bones and in one unfortunate misstep, catching himself on an unseen branch. Will knew his time was running out, knew he'd have to find a place soon, somewhere to stop. *Somewhere to die.*

As Will struggled on, he heard rushing water to his right. Changing his direction slightly, he moved towards it. Popping out of the thick foliage, he nearly fell headlong into a rushing waterway; a river or tributary. Skidding to a stop, Will briefly considered jumping in. On the one hand, it would give him a break, a chance to change motion. Maybe it would even mask some of his smell, assuming that his hunter even needed to smell him to follow him. On the other hand, Will wasn't the strongest swimmer at the best of times. Exhausted and severely wounded as he was, he didn't think it would be long before he sank underneath the surface. *Death by blood loss, death by drowning... there's got to be a better*

way... Struggling along the river's bank, Will found a fallen trunk forming a natural bridge. Carelessly scrambling onto it, he crawled across, leaving a bloody trail darkening the deep green moss gathered on the trunk. *Must be a better way...*

Will started to run off, but heard the creak of wood behind him. Turning quickly, he saw a shadow leap onto the trunk... a massive bundle of fur and claws, dashing across nimbly towards him. *Shit, I should have taken the river after all...* Backing away from the creature, Will tripped on a tree root, and stumbled. Flailing his arm, turning to absorb the shock of his inevitable landing, Will instead found himself wind-milling through open air. There was no foliage on the other side of the river, instead there was a natural embankment of loose stone and earth, which he found himself tumbling down. Rapidly rolling down this slope, Will was jostled from impact after impact as he fell. His body ricocheted off small bushes and large stones that he encountered in his fall. Will felt a jarring blow; he'd slammed into a rock. The blow shattered his collarbone, driving shards of bone out through his skin as he fell. His scream of pain was muffled instantly as a sapling whipped across his chest, driving the air from his lungs. Will tried to grab the trunk with his hands, in a frantic attempt to slow his fall, only to rediscover his predicament, as his missing arm could not respond to his demands. As Will continued to roll, he withdrew internally, only peripherally aware of what was happening. No longer oxygen starved and terrified, but calm and accepting, Will thought about where he was going, each thought coming between punishing impacts on his body.

This is it.

This is the end.

There is no turning back.

There is only me.

There is only the fall.

There is only my body; shattered, broken.

There is only my soul; shining, whole.

Death embrace me.

I will find a better way.

Will had heard stories about motorcycle crashes. He heard that most riders that came off slid along the ground, losing leathers and, where they had not thought to wear leathers, skin. He had heard that most of these crash victims would survive if they did not do two things. Firstly, if they did not hit something, they would eventually wash off speed, and then they would probably survive. This very much seemed to be something beyond their control to Will, so he dismissed it. Secondly, and most importantly, if they did not try to stand up, they would probably survive. He had heard that most riders, upon crashing and sliding, sensed that they had come to a stop, and then tried to stand up and assess their situation. Unfortunately, what they sensed was merely a reduction in accelerated motion, a reduction in velocity, a rate of change of a rate of change. Then, by standing up, they managed to catapult themselves forwards. Instead of sliding and losing leathers and skin, they rolled. They shattered bones or broke their necks, they cracked their skulls. Will sensed that he was coming to a stop now... but knew in his head that it wasn't true. *A better way*... Pushing his legs under him, Will shot sideways into the air, looking down at another 40 metres of fall. A fall he never

made however, because flying through the air, he crashed into a tree branch with a jarring force.

Will felt the pain of the branch as it impacted with his torso, splintering his ribcage apart before driving itself through a lung, severing his spine and tearing out through his shoulder blade. Abruptly his body came to rest, the momentum of his fall caught on the tree, leaving only his legs swinging from residual kinetic energy. He tried once to take a breath, tried twice... failed... and, realizing that he had accomplished what he wanted to, he smiled. The remaining air of his lungs whispered through his smile.

“...not for you... found a better way...”

Smile still on his dying face, Will felt the last of his life-force slipping from his physical body... but he retained awareness. Teeth sank into his flesh, and some primal memory, deep within his psyche, filled Will with dread. He heard faint screams, fading quickly. Something jerked and tore at his body now... the tree branch swayed... the dead meat of his legs kicked and twitched, and hot breath kissed his face. Will's dying sensations were of meat and sinew being torn from his back and neck, of sharp teeth digging into his body. Tugging. Tearing. Dragging. Eating.

Travel diary, entry 3.

The thing you don't maybe know about me... the thing I've never really ever had tested... well, it's my willpower. I had woken up, burnt, cut, bleeding. I couldn't see out of one eye. I couldn't move my arm. Thought the arm and eye were gone, even. And then I was seeing things, suddenly... something was chasing me. But, it's like I was someone else. I was in such horrible pain, I am still wracked with it, but I did something I never believed I'd do. I got up. And I ran. I ran right through the jungle, all the while bleeding and throwing up and leaving bits of flesh behind. I ran until I couldn't run anymore, hours and hours. I think now that I was running from nothing, but it didn't matter. All that mattered was I was running forwards, fighting. It's something that has stayed with me, through the miasma of memory. I fought, right to the end. This is it, I remember thinking, this is the end.

Chapter 2: Mike.

Mike, bedraggled and sodden, hauled himself up onto another bar stool. Behind the counter, the barkeep made a jovial face. It wasn't that the face that was the problem; it was the body it was perched upon. The barman was a human mountain, balding and snowy on top, with craggy cliffs for facial features, eyes set in cavernous depths and a chin made of jagged rock. Even his belly looked like a glacier, *probably drifts a little more south each year...* and unfortunately, the glacier still appeared to be moving over the valleys and ravines of muscle. Combined with huge boulder-like shoulders, he made for an imposing figure, smiling or not. *All he needs are a few mountaineers crawling over his nose.* Looking around, surreptitiously shaking water off from his coat onto the floor in a feeble attempt at getting dry, Mike caught his first full glimpse of this latest dive. *Oh, well, that's not so bad ... a nudie bar.* Checking that his camera had the lens cap off, just in case someone rich, stupid and famous walked by and felt like being blackmailed, Mike settled back onto his stool with a squelchy sound, and ordered a drink, his drink.

"Yeah, a rusty nail thanks..."

Broad smile plastered across his face, the barkeep turned around and starting looking for his drambuie.

"...a double, and no ice."

One hand already elbow deep in the ice bucket, the barkeep smiled and shook off his wet hand. He turned to say something, but drew to a stop. His eye's flicked over Mike's face, and then shot down to a noticeable bulge beneath his shoulder and breast pocket. Mike could see himself in the barkeep's eyes then, felt the momentary pause, followed by relief as an even bigger, friendlier grin appeared. Mike could guess why. *He's afraid, knows what's in my coat... or thinks he does. It's just too bad he doesn't know what a camera looks like, but if it saves me from having to rely on veiled threats, all the better. And if he wants to be all chummy now, real friendly like, who am I to complain? Maybe I'll get a free drink.*

*

Mike hadn't worn a gun on a shoulder holster in years. He'd learnt that when you're taking a dive, it hurt. When you're taking a punch in the ribs, it hurt. And when you're constantly worried about blowing your nipple off every time you reach for your mobile phone, you've got problems. He'd tried a leg holster, found it all a bit dainty. And nothing screamed, "Hey, I'm going to shoot you!" like reaching down to adjust your socks in the middle of a scuffle. He'd tried down the pants; down the front, which had him checking his balls whenever a car backfired, making sure they hadn't been blown off; down the back, which left a nasty burn scar down his ass-cheek when he'd "holstered" his gun a bit too quickly one time. In the end, he'd decided to keep it the one place it wasn't going to bite him in the ass, figuratively or otherwise. He kept it in his suitcase. Sure, he'd thought, "What good is a gun that's never with me?" He'd also thought about

how much more likely he was to be detained by police, especially when he'd been picked up bleeding on more than a few street corners and bar floors now. In the end, he'd rationalized it this way. "If I need a gun, I should have enough sense to have brought it with me. If something goes really wrong and I suddenly need a gun, I can just try and take one off someone else, save myself the trouble of carrying the damn thing. And for the rest of the time, pulling out a gun doesn't help me beat the shit out of someone any faster, it just keeps one of my hands busy. And also, if I need to travel in a hurry, it's already packed. It's always out of sight, hidden in the compartment custom made and shielded for it, and the only way someone is going to know I have it is if they pinch my ugly tartan luggage, which just isn't gonna happen." And for Mike, having a camera tied on in an improvised shoulder holster did enough to at least convince people he might be packing heat. For the private detective, just like for Mike personally, image remained everything.

*

Shooting his drink down in a sloppy gulp, instantly regretting the 12 dollar cost as much as he welcomed the searing heat of the golden ambrosia, Mike took an opportunity to feign exaggerated drunkenness and take another look around. This was, however, the eighth bar he'd been to tonight, so by most people's standards he was actually drunk already and well on his way to dead, but that didn't matter. Mike had been heading from bar to bar all evening, trying to get a feel for the town. Without much help from the police, and with no real leads, he'd been forced to resorting to barroom hubbub. So far, Mike hadn't learned much

more than that drinks were overpriced, and that barstools got uncomfortable after a few hours wedged in his ass.

He let his head slump into his arms, and peeped out underneath the folds of his drenched coat. His eyes scanned the room, taking in the cheerful ambiance of the place, the darkened corners with concealing *nipples*... benches, the gaudy pink and blue neon signs hanging both inside and out, casting *nipples*...an ethereal glow into the otherwise oppressive blackness. And of course, he paused a few times on the nipples. *One... two... yep, absolutely still sober.* By and large, the bar was in pretty bad shape, and not just in the way of décor. There were only two topless waitresses, and one pole dancer... pretty sad for a bar that looked like it could hold 300 people easily. Sure it was late, sure it was wet. But people come to drown their sorrows just as often in a downpour as they do in the muggy summer heat. Apart from a few sizzled regulars, there wasn't much business being done. The air was stale, the furniture was worn, and everything was grimy. Even the pole seemed a little lackluster, the lithe dancer gingerly putting her weight on it as it wobbled loosely in its socket. *Lawsuit waiting to happen there... might grab a pic *snap*. Maybe the barman will drop a few hundred to make that picture disappe...* A rough hand fell heavily onto Mike's shoulder, tipping his hat over his eyes. Groggily swishing his arms, he knocked his hat away, replacing the view with the bartender's humungous grin. *He's missing more teeth than I expected...*

“Look pal, I know they're pretty to look at, and soft to touch, but no pictures...”

“Oh hey, no, that’s just... that’s just my phone. Sounds a bit like a camera...”

“Sure, whatever. Look, if ya’d like, ya know, a moment alone with one of the ladies... it’s just a coupla hundred...”

Mike started to slurr a reply, but stopped short in the face of that grin.

“Heeey, don’t worry... you’re now one of my best customers, friend... anyone who comes in here is... gotta treat ya with respect or ya won’t come back, right?”

The barman heartily slapped Mike on the shoulder, half knocking him off the barstool and sending up a splash of water from his coat.

“So listen, just let me know... me, if I was ya, I’d pick Rebecca... she’s more’n just pretty, she is. She’s got some real talent...”

“Re... Rebecca? Okay... look, I’m... I’m good for now. But, I’ll tell you what, if I change my mind, you’re the first guy I’ll see, yeah? Hey, how about another rusty nail, I think I can still feel my tongue from the first one...”

*

Okay... so we’re friends now. I’ve had to drink three half filled rusty nails, I’m 36 bux out of pocket, and this guy still thinks I’m taking one of his dancers

home for a bit of a tickle later, but we're friends. Time to put the squeeze on. Time to be smooth...

“Sho, U'm guesshing bushinessh ishn't always shis shlowww?”

“No... well, for a month or two now it has been... but before this, friend, no, we used to do quite well... nothing gets people drinking like nudes...”

“Here heeeere!”

“Hey, shh, not so loud... I know this dump seems a little rough and tumble, but ya know, we're trying hard to not scare away the few regulars left.”

“Shorry”

“We were doing fine, just fine... until the bastards round the corner opened. They're crooked as hell... gotta be. Scared away most of the customers. Scared em or stole em. They're trying to run all the other pubs around here into the ground... strip joints too. Hell, I'm surprised they haven't tried to take over the Starbucks as well. They've got fingers in pies, friend... fingers in pies.” The barman made an undesirably graphic gesture with his hands as he spoke.

“Sho... sho remembuh hows I wus sayin my frenz are losht? Maybe if dey had shome short of... criminunal...criminal... problemsright... they mighta... mighta

ended up with a finger in their pie? Ish mean, they mighta runna foot of these guysh?”

“If ya’ve got people gone missing, they’d be a good place to check...”

“Whythe fucks can’t anyone jush come out and shay that then! Sheeesshh... Ish been shtaggerin round town all bloodshy night, lookin for someone to... to shay just that... shanks for the drinksh, but I’sh gotta go throw up now...”

The bartender looked slowly around, taking a head count of his remaining customers.

“Yeah, friend... it’s been a *real* pleasure, but I think it might be time for ya to leave after all...”

“Osh, and about Rubecca... tellsh her I’ll be back. Shoon as I’ve gone and throws upsh.”

“I think maybe she’d rather ya sobered up a bit... money’s money, but if I don’t, ya know, keep an eye out for em, they’ll quit too. Another night, yeah friend?”

“O shure shure... sheeya roun.”

Mike tried to stand up, slipped off his stool, and cracked his chin on the bar. *Hey, look! There's my hat!* Groggily, he weaved his way outside into the night.

*

Walking outside, Mike tripped over the first step and landed face first on the concrete. It was raining more heavily now that it had been before, and the steps were slick with water. Mike picked himself up off the floor, and a strong gust of wind nearly blew him over onto his back.

I've gotta get out of this rain again... pissed or not, this is no time to be stinking drunk... Weaving his way around the corner, Mike's body dictated a more urgent stop. Ducking into a nearby alleyway, Mike found cover under a fire escape, and undid his fly. He then promptly doubled over, and hurled the contents of his stomach onto the ground. Catching his breath after heaving, Mike knelt down with a hollow thud, carefully avoiding his own vomit, and waited until the world stopped swimming and circling in his vision. After five long minutes, kneeling in the icy cold rain, watching rain trickle over the metallic grating he knelt on, slowly washing away his stomach contents, Mike noticed the blood. It was everywhere, or it had been anyway. Blood spatter was flecking the walls of the alley. Blood was washing away down grates. Blood was soaking into his coat where he knelt. *Holy shit, what the hell happened here?* Even as he watched, the blood washed away. The only patch that was left was rapidly mixing with his

vomit, washing down into the metallic plate Mike knelt on. *Metallic... hollow... ahah! A basement!*

Struggling to his feet, carefully avoiding slipping over in the small amount of blood and vomit that was left on the street, Mike gingerly lifted the metal grill off the ground. *Looks like one of those things you see near pubs, to let them lower kegs and bulk goods into a cellar. A pub... on the corner...oh shit!* He was too sozzled and gun-less to go barging in and find out what happened right now. Hastily, Mike tried to scrape up some of the blood, before the rain washed it all away. Reaching down into the cellar a small way, Mike managed to scoop some fluid up into one of the only two containers he had handy. It was his hat or his lens cap... in the end, Mike used his lens cap, filling it with as much blood as he could before covering it up with his fist to protect it from the rain. He figured he might need to keep it covered for a while, it was a fair walk to the nearest cop shop, and that was the only place he could get it tested, find out anything about it. It was evidence, it needed to be checked. And he couldn't use his hat for evidence, he'd decided, as he might need it to throw up in again later...

Where everybody knows your name... doo, dada dada dum dum...

Okay, so it isn't Cheers, Norm isn't crushing a tiny barstool under his enormous ass, but it feels homey. I've found a town, and I'm sniffing around, seeing what I can find out. I've got work to do; I've started asking around town. I didn't exactly bring along a wallet stuffed with bills, either, so I need to sort this out fast. No one seems to know anything, but I'll hang around for a day or two, try and uncover the truth. It's all a big cover up, I tells ya. I blame the cabal!

Chapter 3: Jonathon.

I wish someone had thought about this possibility. I wish someone had said, "I bet the future will be the single most psychedelic place you will ever go." That would have been something handy to know.

Jonathon lay flat on his stomach on the cold floor, and tried not to think about the rumbles in his stomach. At a guess, he estimated he had been lying down for four hours now, and the entire time he had been alone. Unfortunately for Jonathon, he couldn't see the solitude ending anytime soon. The wonderment that had come from touching the crystalline pyramid had faded away as it had, and in its place, Jonathon found himself in what could only be described as a big green cube. He had taken a few tentative steps, looked around, shaken his head, become dizzy, and sat down. Waves of nausea washed over him, possibly shock, and Jonathon had closed his eyes and tried not to think about moving. Slowly, the sensation of being made of jelly subsided, and Jonathon managed to look around. This time the room was a light shade of purple. Jonathon carefully stood up, and took a few tentative steps. Roaming shakily around the room, Jonathon discovered there was no visible door, window, or aperture of any kind. The floor appeared to be made from the same material that the walls and ceiling were, all of which were slightly soft to the touch, but firmly unyielding as more pressure was applied, and had an eye-jarring habit of oscillating through colours. *Wonder if sticking me inside a kaleidoscope is supposed to make me less hostile... or more nauseous?* It hadn't been long before the noises had begun.

A sound that seemed to begin out of his hearing range had started, and Jonathon could only manage to focus on some of the lower notes, which seemed to thrum in his ears and made the hairs on the back of his neck tingle. Amused, but slightly uncomfortable, Jonathon had smiled politely through the noise, which lasted for about a minute. *Maybe something is trying to say hello... better not start shouting for my lawyer, doubt that'd go down too well...* The entire time, Jonathon looked for the source of the sound, only to find the entire surface of the room resonated with the noise, just as it projected the flux of colours. With a sound like a popped bubble, the noise cut off. Thirty seconds later, it was replaced with monkey howls. After that, Jonathon would have sworn he was listening to the sound of frogs breathing underwater. Followed by sand falling onto drum skins, a low sibilant hiss that changed in pitch. Then some sort of code, made up of long and short sounds, but unlike any he had heard before. *Great, it's Morse code being made by insects.*

And so, for four hours, Jonathon had sat in the colour-confused room, and listened to the cacophony. On at least six occasions, the attempts seemed to shift into different approaches, including a brief spasmodic burst of colour that had convinced Jonathon he probably wasn't a light-sensitive epileptic, a foul rotting smell that had been so overpowering Jonathon could still smell and taste it, and other unusual experiences. *At least no one is trying to talk to me through anal probe... now that'd be a one sided conversation.* Jonathon rolled over and looked at the ceiling, which had become an impressive vista of gold and crimson waves. The noise began again, but this time, there were human-sounding tones. Unfortunately, there was nothing comprehensible, but Jonathon sat bolt upright

anyway, interested in hearing what came next. The following round of noise sounded vaguely like English, maybe some archaic form of Germanic or something, and there were vowel and consonant sounds that Jonathon might have even managed to put together into words, if he'd had longer than the speech had lasted. Next came another range of gibberish, clicks and whirrs that Jonathon had only belatedly thought could be something like what Kalahari Bushmen spoke. *Fat lot of good that'd do me.* Next came something that might or might not have been a Chinese dialect, but Jonathon had never really learned any non-swear words.

“Hajimemashite...”

Jonathon jumped to his feet, and shouted out in surprise.

“HEY! Wait! That’s Japanese!”

The noise cut off mid speech, and followed by a short pause, produced in broken, pieced-together annunciation, a request.

“Pu-lease spe-ak aygayn.”

“What the hell? You speak English? Erm... hi. Wow, that’s the lamest thing I could possibly say, isn’t it? Where am I? Where are you? Is this the future? What the hell is going on? Where’s the rock thing gone? Can you let me out?”

“Please, no more making speaking. We are ascertaining to isolate your time epoch and domestic speech patterns. We are unlikely as with the details to your dialectalogue, your speeches is unknowing to us. A moment postponement could follow, we aks for your time.”

Damn. I've been sitting in a room for four hours, with the ultimate in answering machines.

*

The momentary delay had turned into another half hour. Jonathon was asked repeatedly to demonstrate everyday speech. Subsequently, he would then be instructed to be silent. Taking offense to both the lack of answers to his questions, and the abrupt manner in which he was silenced, Jonathon had begun quoting movie quotes and anything else unusual that came into his head.

“My God, it's full of stars!”

“Please become silence, again.”

“Please make speeches again.”

“Chicks dig me, because I rarely wear underwear and when I do it's usually something unusual. But now I know why I have always lost women to guys like

you. I mean, it's not just the uniform. It's the stories that you tell. So much fun and imagination.”

“Please do not speak again.”

“Please talk again.”

“Asteroids don’t concern me, Admiral. I want them found!”

*

Finally, the English of the unseen voice had achieved a level of comparable skill to his own. The requests for new samples had stopped, and Jonathon was told that someone would come to see him shortly. Waiting patiently now, Jonathon was actually starting to feel very nervous. *Sure, yeah, it'll be fun to wiseass with the machines... but how are these guys gonna take that? I mean... what if they don't have a sense of humour? Oh god, I'm so boned. Vulcans... they'll be bloody Vulcans. Except it'll be worse, because they won't even know what Vulcans are, and they STILL won't get any of my lines. Damnit, I knew I shoulda been more polite.* A small opening appeared to be forming in the wall in front of him. *I wonder if it's too late to apologise...* A small shaft of light beamed in, and at the same time, the walls, floor and ceiling returned to a neutral grey colour. *Oh crap, grey... no one ever saw grey and thought, wow, great sense of humour. It's gonna be anal probes and autopsies for sure...* The slit of light ripped upwards and downwards at the same time, seemingly tearing the surface of

the room apart, and finally in it's place stood a jagged doorway. And framed in that doorway was a silhouette. *Oh gawd, what's that in his hand?*

“Greetings. I am Dahvit.”

*

The silhouette, it turned out, could possibly have been cast by the most unexciting person to ever greet a time traveler. Stepping forwards into the light, a rather plainly adorned human male stood. And in his hand appeared to be a plate, with what looked suspiciously like a ham and cheese sandwich. Beckoning, he led Jonathon out into the light. The light, in turn, proved to be coming from a rather docile and decidedly colour-consistent hallway.

*

As they walked, Jonathon finally began to receive some answers to his questions.

“You are correct, this is indeed your future. This is the glorious city of AlphaPrime.”

Jonathon paused mid bite to look inquisitively at his food.

“Ahn dis sannich?”

“The ‘sannich’ was a food product produced for you by Vector, which was scanning you as you lay recalcitrant on the advent room ground. It is believed to contain flavours of animals from your time period, and condiments comprised of various aged seeds and vegetables, sandwiched between layers of grain-bread. Oh... I’d guess that’s why you call it a ‘sannich’, presumably?”

“Uhhh, yeash, that’s why. Hey, I wasn’t being recalcitrant. If I’d known I had to speak to get spoken to, I would have. Look... I kinda know where I am now... but, how’d I get here? Last thing I knew, I was fascinated with this weird thing in the jungle.”

“Ah, the amber drop.”

“The wha?”

“No, the amber drop. It is the device that you interacted with, and through which you arrived here. It must truly have been a wonderful sensation, I do so hope I can try it one day...”

Jonathon spat out the mouthful of sandwich in surprise.

“You mean you’ve never tested the damn thing, Dave?”

“Oh Vector has. But never myself. Anyway, it is called the amber drop because it, well, this is a very simplified explanation, but it acts something like amber apparently, whatever that is. You are attracted to the amber, it speaks to you. And once you have touched the drop, you are ensnared. It isn't quite as barbaric as that, however, and many have reported the sensation is truly a pleasant thing. Something like an apotheosis, that is the general metaphor used. Was it this way for you?”

“Uhm... you know what, it was just a bit tingly. Nothing shorts blowing in there. So basically this thing suckered me in? Why? And you keep talking about others... how many other suckers... people have fallen for this ‘amber drop’?”

“I am not too sure how many Relics are currently with us, perhaps I can find out. Would you like to have a look around, after you finish eating?”

*

This place is amazing.

AlphaPrime. The last bastion city of humanity, or its descendants in any event. Never had Jonathon imagined in his wildest dreams that something so beautiful and complex could exist. Encased in a powerful bubble of energy, AlphaPrime was completely isolated from the outside environment. The citizens, while curious about Jonathon, were also enraptured with various pieces of technology attached to their bodies, and after a curious look, went back into a

ceaseless wash of humanity, all chatting and smiling and friendly. Faces and bodies blurred around him wherever he looked, between the long spanning arches overhead, or ducking into the various doorways and towers that he stood amongst. There did not seem to be any real vehicular traffic, despite the immensity of the city, and everywhere he looked, people were on foot, walking unhurriedly to whatever destinations they had.

“So tell me Dave... why am I here?”

“Oh, that is very simple. We’re trying to create something of a living museum of the past. Rather than just have pictures and relics of lives, Vector thought we would appreciate the beauty of pre-civilised life here amongst us. So throughout time, amber drops were seeded, and whenever they attract someone, you are brought here to stay amongst us. So far, this has worked wonderfully, and we have encountered species and cultures unimagined.”

“But why me?”

“Oh, well. Again, much embarrassment, but we have come to realise that it was not in fact intended to be you. The amber drop was placed to gather someone from a very different time period. Subsequently we had no idea who you were or when you were from when you arrived. We anticipated something called an Amazonite Primordial to us. We are uncertain where you actually fit in. Presumably the amber drop was poorly placed, or failed to envelop our intended relic. I do not suppose you discovered any remains near the amber drop did you?”

“Uhm. Not so much, no. And... no one has ever gone Ghenghis Khan on your ass, when they get here? How long am I supposed to stay here exactly anyway?”

“Pardon? From your phrasing I gather you are hinting at hurt feelings? If you are asking if there has ever been a violent response to the uninvited temporal translation, then no, there has not been. We have always opened our lives to our guests, and in turn they have enjoyed a unique status amongst us, as living relics. Indeed, the whole process is often fascinating for our relics. We have brought amongst us many cultures that revere and worship the sun, and when we explain to them that it is through the power of the sun that they are brought through time they are always in awe...”

“Power of the sun, I get it. Big bloody timeless ball of fire and gas. And no one has ever become violent? I wonder if there’s something in your water here...”

“Oh yes. Nutrients. And small doses of narcotics and calmative medicants. Our people are friendly, but it never ceases to amaze us at how stubborn some relics can be, when it comes to drinking our water and eating our food. It is as if they do not trust Vector.”

“And to get home, who do I have to see about that?”

“Vector... oh yes, definitely Vector. But that’s a talk for later, yes?”

“Yeah, okay... we’ll save Vector. So anyway... what’s outside the shield, Dave?”

“The shield? Why, the ruins of humanity of old. Didn’t you see it as you arrived? Marvelous, isn’t it... but come, this way... there is one more thing you simply have to see...”

November 3rd

Turns out they were soldiers, and they had big guns. And they didn't speak English. I got dragged off in the jeep, dumped in a room. After hours and hours of fuckassing about, I finally found someone who could speak English... and then some flunky guy came and let me out. I feel a bit like a guest now, they're feeding me anyway, and no one has hit me, but something is really suss about this place. I mean it all seems above board, just some town, everyone walks around smiling a hell of a lot. But then you see the guards by the walls, guns out. It just doesn't add up. ~~I don't think I'll mention the guys~~ Damn, wish I'd brought an eraser.

Thought for the day: English is not a universal language, so I'm going to hit the next trekkie I see.

Chapter 3: Erik.

The worst thing, as far as Erik was concerned, was that the dwarf appeared to be right. Despite several hours worth of attempts at backtracking to the jungle, Erik found himself returning to the same misty vista of fantastic forest. It didn't matter anymore that the dwarf couldn't exist, and that he'd ridden off on an impossible Gus. It didn't matter that whenever Erik did return to the same point in the mists he encountered the impossibly beautiful flower. It didn't matter that Erik could have sworn he'd heard Ming whisper to him while he wandered around, lost in the gloom. It was just truly unsettling to Erik that his delusions had a better idea of what was going on than he did.

Stumbling again through the grey murk of fog and mist, Erik inexorably found his way back to the brilliantly coloured flower, now decidedly worse for wear, having been plucked, and trodden into the ground in frustration on one occasion. Looking away from the curtain of mist, Erik could see the beautiful jungle. *At least I am hallucinating somewhere pretty.* Stooping to pick up the crumpled flower, and carefully tucking it into Ming's jacket, Erik found himself walking into a dreamland.

*

Right, first things first. Shelter. I think I'm going to need it. Erik had picked his way through the forest for a little over an hour, and had finally come to a gently trickling river. There was no civilization of any sort, or people for that

matter, at least that had crossed Erik's path. He hadn't found any natural caves, or even seen any signs of life. The closest thing to shelter had been a hillock that had been washed away into something of a natural wind break. Still, looking at the mud along the side, and the precarious nature of the earth hanging overhead, Erik had decided to push on, and try for something less life threatening.

Guess I'm either going to have to sleep under the stars, or make myself some kind of tent... A piercing, frightened cry rang out, interrupting his thoughts. *That came from behind...* Erik started to run to the sound, flinging Ming and the abused flower down onto the vibrant green grass by the river. Dashing through the forest wasn't quite as arduous as Erik expected it to be. The woodland was mostly trees with tall, straight trunks, and few scratchy twigs or thorns. Erik came skidding into a clearing, the scream still echoing in his ears, arrested by the sight before him. Ahead, he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen before in his life. She was elfin in appearance, fair and graceful, and her face bore a terrified expression. About to step forward, Erik saw something that drove him quickly back into the trees. Towering impressively over the demure elf's frightened form was the most majestic creature Erik had ever imagined, could ever have dreamed of. As it pushed through the trees, approaching the still terrified elf, Erik tried to accept what he was seeing. Brilliant jade scales caught the sunlight in beads of rainbow reflection, and highlighted the sleek, powerful curvature of the muscled neck and body, the lean shoulders and almost daintily folded wings of emerald hued leather held tightly to its smooth spine. A noble head hung imperiously over the cowering elf maiden, watching her with amused,

intelligent eyes and brilliantly white teeth, caught somewhere between a smile and a laugh. ...*my god... it's a dragon!*

"Please, I am the last of my kind... please don't eat me..."

The dragon did indeed laugh then, a slow, cruel laugh. It was the laugh that broke the illusion of the dragon's majesty for Erik, and he too began to feel terrified. Drawing back into the safety of the trees, he could only watch fearfully. The dragon rose up on his hind legs, seemingly considering the plaintive cries of the elf maiden. Unexpectedly, the dragon thrust powerfully downward, smashing his razor-sharp teeth into the woman's soft flesh. He bit down hard for grip, and quickly flicked his neck back up, swallowing the carcass whole. Erik gasped, still on the balls of his feet, ready to run, but it was too late. He was caught firmly in place, as the gaze of the dragon fell languidly over him, alerted by his wordless cry.

"And what the hell are you looking at?"

"How?! How could you... you just ended her whole goddamn species there? You... vicious... monster!"

"Oh don't tell me you bought that crap? Daoine-Sidhe, there are thousands of the damn things. Every week I catch one, and every week it tries the same tricks... 'please sir, I am the last of my kind... please

don't eat me'. Balls. The forest is riddled with them. I'm surprised you haven't tripped over them on the way here..."

"A dinneeshee? Is that an elf? And she... she begged for her life! She... she begged... and you ate her anyway..."

The dragon snorted in disgust. It appeared to Erik that the distracted dragon was about to utter a scathing reply, that is, until the shaft of an arrow bloomed through its left eye. This sole shaft was rapidly followed by several hundred more, piercing the tender spots of the dragon's body, each seemingly guided by a divine hand as it landed in impossibly small, vulnerable places. Spitting up blood and fabric, the dragon wordlessly fell to the ground. Erik swung around wildly, trying to spot the archers that had fired, but only caught sight of one face; solemn, angular, exotic. She turned away and disappeared before his eyes, blending skillfully into the trees.

"Hey! Hey come back! Are you Dinneeshee too? I... I don't suppose you can... help... me..."

Silence greeted Erik's request.

"Come back here you wankers, I've got questions!"

Without warning, an arrow shot from the forest and thunked solidly into a tree, just above Erik's head.

"I'm sorry... fair enough, then. How about I keep the dragon bits then huh?"

Again, silence greeted Erik. *Good enough for me, this thing'll come in handy. Good, strong hide. Might make a good tent, once I skin it. Maybe it's waterproof too. Hmm... I could cook up the meat, even...* Erik caught sight of the bloodied fabric of the Daoine-Sidhe, strewn around the carcass of the dragon. *Or not... maybe shelter will do... that's a little close to cannibalism for me. Oh crap, hope no one stole my severed arm...*

*

Erik was relieved to find that Ming had not been stolen, and together they returned to the scaly carcass. Skinning the dragon had proven to be easier than expected. After removing as many of the finely-crafted arrows as he could work out with his hands, Erik had hunted around for some cutting implement. Initially, he'd hoped to use the arrow heads, but they had turned out to be nothing more than pointed wood. After some searching, Erik found a sharpened stone, and began skinning. With an incision in the tender flesh under the throat as his starting point, Erik had managed to pull several sizeable skins off, and had set them down to dry in the sun. Returning to the river, and after washing the gore from his hands, Erik had pondered what else he would need to survive in his new life. *Wonder if there's anything else useful...* Erik returned to the skinless dragon, and

tried to extend one of the wings. Despite the stiffness of the skin, the limb itself was quite lightweight, and Erik started to cut away at the muscle and supporting tissue around the shoulder joint with his stone. Within half an hour of painstaking progress, Erik had managed to remove both wings, and had put them aside along with his pile of bloodied arrows and rapidly drying skins. *Hmm... intestines. I could try and make string, if they're not too torn.*

Several hours later, and after a few trips to the river to wash more and more gore from his clothing, Erik began to soak the intestines. Once wet, Erik stretched several lengths of twisted, entwined bowel across the trees in neat lengths. *Nothing fancy... but maybe they'll hold up a tent in a stiff breeze once they dry out.* Erik began to move his skins to a new location, keen to set up a resting place for the night that wasn't too close to the dragon's carcass. *Gotta be careful I don't get too far from the river.* Moving slowly through the trees, half buried under the skins bundled neatly, albeit gorily, in his arms, Erik completely failed to notice the long bow that lay in his path. Stepping on the bowstring with a loud twang, he gasped as it snapped back and lashed at his ankle. Erik managed to hang onto his skins and his balance. Putting his load aside to examine his stinging wound, Erik discovered the bow. *Now that's lucky... and it'll still come in handy, if my strings ever dry. It'd be a shame to waste it... who knows how long I'm going to be here, and now I've got myself something to hunt with.*

*

That night, Erik was ready to sleep under his hastily constructed tent. He had found a place, not too far from his drying intestines, that seemed to meet his needs, and had begun to pile the skins together. Discovering some native plant-life that would make a serviceable string, also, Erik had begun to carefully twine the fibers for his tent. *Where were these when I was elbow deep in dragon bits? Ah well... they'll do until the real strings dry, and they smell nicer.* Placing a windbreak comprised primarily of dragon-wings up just as the sun fell out of sight, Erik settled back comfortably and watched the stars. *Tomorrow, maybe I can string the bow, and maybe even get some fishing done.* Slowly at first, so slowly in fact that Erik didn't notice, the stars began to oscillate around him. It did catch his attention however, when they started to talk.

"Oh wow, look at the size of him... he's tiny... well, huge, but tiny..."

"But he killed the dragon... he bravely kept him distracted... didn't even flinch as arrows whizzed right past his ears...."

"You two are fools... he didn't notice, that's why..."

"No, he knew... he was so upset... so upset that the elf got eaten. Nasty little things that they are, he was upset"

"Maybe he thought she was huge like him..."

"No, I think he believed her... he actually believed that she was the last of her kind..."

"See... like I said. Fools... you two, and him..."

Feigning sleep, Erik watched as what appeared to initially be stars came closer, and resolved into something akin to fireflies. Buzzing closer and closer to his face, Erik discovered, to his horror, that floating above his head were several

tiny, glowing creatures that in fact seemed to resemble little tiny people with wings. *Hey neat, mosquitos have been replaced with fairies. Hope they don't bite.* Turning over and covering his face with his arm, Erik tried to blot out the noise of the fairies as they chatted about him. Overhead, brilliant, impossible stars lit the sky.

Day 4.

Okay, I'm losing it. I have to be. I'm still out here, in the jungle. I didn't turn back, didn't go back to the plane. I couldn't. I can't find my way. I keep seeing things... strange things... things that can't possibly be here. I'm hallucinating. I think I might just have to stay here another day or two, try and find some fresh water and food, try and get a grip. I think it might be a post traumatic stress related thing, or delirium from dehydration. Starting today, I'm going to begin making a camp, then I'll get onto food and drink. Thank god there are lots of things I can use out here... although they seem a bit, uhm, grisly.

Chapter 3: Will.

Pain... Will opened his eyes... and saw nothing. No light, no faces, no angels, no demons. He couldn't see anything, smell anything. He was unable to move, and even keeping his eyes open was a struggle. He couldn't relax though, pain was throbbing through every nerve. Whenever he shut his eyes, he saw flashes of light. The gleam of wickedly long teeth. The dull glow of shattered bone. The hazy sunlight, blocked by an impossibly huge form, slowly growing larger and larger. Writhing in pain and fear, Will tried again to run. There was nowhere to run, no way to run. Eyes shut, he wrestled with the images in his mind, but there was nowhere to run in there either.

*

Will returned to the conscious world gradually. He was still in a lot of pain, but it felt different. Gone was the sharpness of a cut, jarred with every movement. In its place was a dull ache, constant, nearly overpowering, but somehow more reassuring. All around him, Will heard growling.

*Can't... can't still be alive. I died. I felt it. I was dying. And something... something tried to... to what? Why does it hurt so much? It just can't hurt this much... it's just not right. The growling... the darkness. A den? A cave? Did whatever... the thing... did it bring me here? Oh shit, why does it hurt so much? In... my arm? Why does my arm hurt? It's gone. Pain... all the way down to the hand. The hand that's gone. Why are they just growling? **We are alone right now.***

The pain...will end. All pain comes to an end. When it is time. Time... time... how long... how long have I been lying here? Dying? How long can this go on for... as long as it takes. The growls... they're fading. They're gone? Maybe I can open my... eye. Maybe I can get away... run again. We can't. We're too weak now. We're on the very brink of death. We're waiting. Waiting... what am I waiting for? Waiting for power. For strength. For life, anew. But the growling... it's gone. I can be free. I can try and get away... but the growling, it's not what we think. The noises... this place. I can be free of here. The growling has stopped... Yes, the growling has stopped; for we have stopped making the noise.

*

Sunlight warmed Will's face, and he reflexively turned his head towards it, enjoying the first real warmth he had felt since the plane crash. He blinked open his eyes, surprised at how dreamy he felt. He had no idea how long he had been asleep, but he could finally look around. The pain in his body had dulled another note, and much of the aching had turned into an uncomfortable itch. Although still too weak to sit up, Will took an opportunity to look around. *So... not a den. Not a cave. Just some strange hut. With windows. It... must have been night before. No wonder I couldn't see. There doesn't seem to be any power here, so no lights... and I guess whoever lives here turned out their lamp. No growling now. No fear... just an empty hut...*

A figure shuffled into his field of view, obscured by the bright sunlight streaming in from above. After a moment, Will managed to blink away the retina

burn on his eyes, and saw a friendly, elderly lady in front of him. She seemed to be smiling, white teeth glinting harshly in the sunlight... smiling as much to herself as to anyone in particular. In her hand she had a kettle, and she might have been boiling water on the stove. Humming a wordless tune as she worked, Will was fascinated with her graceful movements around the hut, sidestepping clutter and mess dexterously while holding her steaming kettle. Having made her drink, she came over to sit with Will, resting herself gently in a chair left noticed until she brought it into his field of view.

“Oh, hello. You shouldn’t be awake yet.”

“Muh... buhh...”

“Oh no dear, not yet. Shut your eyes... it will be over soon.”

Eyes...don't have eyes anymore... EYES!?

Will’s vision swam, and slowly drew into focus. He tried to close his right eye, and found he could still see, blurrily. Opening his right eye again, he could see depth, as his eyes focused on the ceiling. *That’s... that’s impossible.*

Will struggled to push himself upright, tried to look around, frightened. Pain shot across his torso. *It’s all wrong... this isn’t right. I... I’ve only got one eye left. I know it. I felt it...* The elderly lady put her cup down on the floor beside her chair, came over, and effortlessly pushed Will back into a reclining position.

“No no... rest. Too soon...”

Scrabbling with his arms, his hands, pain suddenly shot all along the left side of his body. Writhing in pain, eyes mad with fright, Will finally noticed his left arm. The arm he'd lost. The arm that it seems had found him. Gone was his burnt stump, and Will instead saw a bloodied, skeletal appendage. Distinctly, bone gleamed sickly amongst the gore. New bone. Clean bone, without chips, without flaws. Wrapped around that bone were the beginnings of muscle and ligaments... and up near the shoulder, the meat had begun to grow skin. And over it all, blood pumped... constantly, trickling down over the torn flesh, the fresh bone, the growing muscle. Will watched as his skeletal hand formed a fist... watched as he tried to smash it into the mat he rested on. Felt the sting of pain, sting of nerves that were still forming over his tissue. Watched the hand open up... recognised it as his own... somehow, deep down, he knew it was his own.

“Too soon... rest.”

Will closed his eyes, lay back, and became lost.

*

Will developed a burning fever that night. It lasted long into the next day. Whenever he found himself fighting his way to consciousness, he arrived drenched in sweat, and confused. Constantly shivering, despite his heat, Will

couldn't help but cower under whatever he was using for a blanket. Patiently, the elderly lady would pull the coverings down again, and wipe his brow with a wet cloth, triggering more shivers to wrack his form. Looking over at his arm in these feverish moments of consciousness, Will noted each time that it appeared to be healing. The first two times, he could still see bone through the muscle. After that, just muscle tissue. And the last time, pale hairless skin was growing, patchy, like clumps of grass. And every time, the pain in his body receded, replaced more and more by an itching sensation. And an ever-present hunger, gnawing at his insides.

During the fever, the elderly lady rarely spoke, except to reassure him and encourage him to rest. Once, when Will had finally managed to ask why he was shivering, she had smiled stared into his eyes. Her eyes were strange, haunting, yet there was a sharpness... a calculating squint, hidden away under the sad loneliness. Looking at him fondly with her strange eyes, she had sighed.

"There is poison in your blood. Your wounds were terrible, but they're closing. You're still weak. Weak to poison in your blood, to infection. So you are trying to sweat out the poisons. It will take time. I dare say you'll live, you've certainly proven intransigent enough on that point. And soon, soon again you will be well. Now rest... it is too soon."

*

Will awoke again, and for the first time in recent memory, nothing hurt. Smiling, convalescing in the cool night air, Will tried to ignore his hunger.

“So tell me Cyntia, what has happened to me?”

“This... will be difficult to explain. Perhaps I should just let time give you the answers.”

“No, please. Even if you can’t tell me everything... just, something. Something to go on.”

“Hmm. I will tell you some. Even I don’t know it all. I don’t even know where you’d find some of your answers, but there are things I can tell you, things you will learn, soon enough. Do you remember how you came to be here?”

“No. I thought... I had a dream, a dream that I died. I... I was impaled. Skewered. It was frantic... I was frantic. Something chased me. Something wicked... something...”

“Wicked is not the word. It caught you, Will. Caught you fast in its snare. You did not escape. You did not die, although you came close... oh so close. It fed upon your flesh... no, don’t look so startled... you are well now, do not forget that. There is no need for fear... not anymore. But it fed upon you. And in doing so, it changed you.”

“Changed me? It... it wasn’t a dream... I... I really did lose my arm? My eye? My... my god, my chest... I had... something... a thing... through my chest.”

Will tried to lift up his covers, pulled away the unfamiliar clothing he was wearing. On his chest he saw a faint scar of white tissue, pink around the edges. It was exactly where he felt he'd being impaled. *What... it can't have happened... that isn't possible! I must be dead...*

"That wound... that was your worst. It healed the fastest. The ribs had set... the skin closed, before... before the beast was even finished dragging you to the ground. I saw... I was close by. I saw the bones knit, the tissue grow. The blood stop."

"The... beast. What was it? You must know... it didn't touch you! It chased me... chased me so far. But you... it must have seen you..."

"I don't know what the beast is. I never have. I only know what it can do. It can leap swiftly, it can run silently. And it can kill. It has innumerable ways... but you are safe now. It... will never touch you again."

"How... how can you say that? It chased me down... it tried to eat me!"

Thinking about being eaten, Will was uncomfortably reminded of his own hunger. His stomach was aching badly now, and he was becoming anxious, fidgety. Wanted to get up, move around. *Maybe I can find a sandwich, something.*

“It did... it did chase you. And in the end, it did eat you. Part of you anyway. It partook of your flesh... but, when it did, it saved you. It has returned you to life, whole. It has given you a second chance.”

“But... those eyes. There was hunger... and... I felt it... as I lay dying... I felt it... it was tugging, tugging at the flesh in my shoulder... my throat. It... it wasn’t saving me then. It was eating...”

“No more. It saved you. Rest assured, it saved you. But, there are wounds now, wounds that will never heal. Here, let me show you.”

Cyntia rummaged around in a basket at the end of the bed, and brought out a piece of polished glass. Holding it out to him, she pointed at her neck. Looking into the mirrored surface, seeing his reflection, Will let out an involuntary moan. Across his throat, tear marks were visible, livid against his pale skin. Turning his head to the right, Will could see the marks trailed down across his shoulder and out of sight. Looking up again, over the mirror, Will noticed Cyntia staring intently at him. Something in her determined expression again reminded him he was hungry. An emptiness was eating away at him, an emptiness that seemed to be eating away at the elderly woman, too.

“Cyntia... why... why do I feel so hungry? Have I not eaten enough?”

“Oh Will... you have. But... you must eat something more substantial. Your body... your body consumed much of itself, to heal. You... you are feeling

a deeper hunger. Come... come outside, if you think you can walk... come and I will show you.”

No longer weak, eager to leave his convalescing bed, Will sprang to his feet and walked to the door. Aside from his ever-growing hunger, he felt fine. Full of energy. Alive. Cyntia walked outside, ahead of him in spite of his quickness. Standing outside, Will noticed the clouds darkening the night for the first time. The clouds were beautiful. But there was something else. Will could taste the night air. Will sniffed lightly, and caught the scent of blood. A scent that had soaked deep into his clothes. But there was more, and out, in the darkness, he could smell something. *It's like... it smells... a bit like... an animal? But it's so strong... pig?* Will could almost picture it with his mind, see where it walked, how large it was... even imagined tasting it. Hunger pains dug into his stomach.

“Cyntia... what... what is happening?”

Wordlessly, Cyntia undid her robe and let it slide to the ground. Standing naked, she no longer resembled an elderly woman... she was something far older still. A sharp cry escaped her lips, lips that elongated as he watched. She threw her arms wide... impossibly wide. Her bones snapped, her flesh tore, and Will looked away. Silence. Turning towards her, he discovered Cyntia was gone. *Oh my god... that's not possible... what is she... Why am I so hungry?* His own flesh tearing now, Will felt his bones grow hot, his muscles bunching up. *What am I? I am...* Throwing his head back, he let out a wordless cry. From above, parting the

clouds, moonlight fell across Will's body. Without any hesitation, Will plunged deep into the jungle, following the scent of death. Following the scent of Cyntia.

Travel diary, entry 4.

I kept trying to get away. I threw myself down a hill, and with a last stumbling step I was caught on tree branches and shrubbery. That's when things get confusing. I was found, rescued somehow. Last thing I remember was being 10 metres up or something, but I was found, and rescued. A little old lady pulled me down, brought me back to her hut. I've been here since then. I woke up, feverish still, but pretty much okay. A few scars on my neck and chest, but nothing bad. I've been getting better, since then. I don't know how long it has been, however long a fever lasts I guess. The woman, a nice, strange lady, understands some English, and she was kind enough to bring me this book to write in. I can't go anywhere, yet, but in a few days, she seems to think I'll be walking around. I owe her a lot.

Chapter 3: Mike.

Mike walked carefully down the street, averting his gaze from passing cars, pedestrians, anything that might distract him from his two goals. *Walk tall. Don't throw up.* The rain refused to die down. Water streamed into the drains and grates along the sidewalk until they'd flooded, and then carried on down the street, carrying the flotsam and detritus of humanity in its wash. Carrying Mike in its wash. *Downtown. Cop town.* Mike had already been there, hoped they'd remember his face. Hoped they would know better than to ask the wrong questions. *At least all this rain is good for one thing... sure as hell beats a Laundromat for washing puke and blood out of a thick jacket.* Turning away from another blinding set of headlights, Mike swung around a nearby corner, and kept following the wash, kept heading downhill. In his hand he held the lens cap. The lens cap filled with blood from the alleyway. Blood he hoped would give him some idea what had happened. Blood he hoped would help find his friends.

*

Only things worse than getting drunk are getting sober again, and being awake while it happens. The lights, they're leaving snaking trails across my eyes, and every time a car drives past, it sears itself in my mind. And it's all in double vision, weaving in and out. Or I am. Freeze frames. Cut. A street lamp, leaning at an odd angle... hit by a car, or seen by a drunk. Can't tell which. Cut. A letter box, kicked to shit, reflecting neon lights from a late night bar, somehow glowing brighter than the stars in the sky. Cut. A speeding car, swerving away from the

curb at the last minute, just missing me. Cut. And cut again. Each cut a flash of red, a wash of blood... too much blood. Blood that is drying in my palm. Blood that is running through the sewers, the roots of the earth. Blood that still felt warm, even though it was cold, and stormy. Why did I have to get drunk? I'm from out of town, unconnected, sure. Had to play it cool. Had to make it look real. But too much... a little self control, maybe I could have stayed. Could have taken a look then and there. Not straight enough to shoot, and not packing heat anyway. But burning with Dutch courage, and ready for a fight all the same. Instead, here I am, running away. Running for help. Running from the problems in my life, looking for answers... answers I doubt I'm gonna get. Never got my answers at the bottom of the bottle yet... but maybe, maybe this time... maybe this time I'll get the right questions.

*

Walking straight now. Feeling straight. Mike adjusted his coat and hat with his free hand, carefully keeping his other hand balled into a fist, stuffed into his pocket. *Still look like a bum, but at least I'm not so green around the gills. Nothing like a bloody monsoon to sober you up in a real hurry.* In front of him now, the police station burned with a white light. Holy, or just fluorescent, Mike couldn't tell. Putting on his most serious face, the face normally reserved for killers and debt collectors, Mike strode forcefully into the station. *Oh thank god the doors opened... last thing I need to do is smack into an automated door late at night, with a fist full of blood, a soggy coat, and a camera with pictures of a stripper sliding around on a wonky pole.* The desk sergeant looked up, saw Mike,

and wordlessly pointed down the hall. *He knows I know where I'm going. Gotta go see the 'real' detectives. And I'd bet they've found out a whole heap, sitting here, in the dry.*

“Jesus, what’s that smell?”

“Well, look who’s back.”

“Who? Here we go...”

“Yeah, I’m real thrilled to see you two boys as well.”

Steven Lafferty and Kyle Sloan. Detectives assigned to look into the disappearance of Mike’s friends. Detectives who didn’t give two shits, and who had better things to do. *My kind of people... if they ever make my kind of people in extra large, anyway.*

“I’ve got something...”

“What did you do?”

“I bet he’s been going around, breaking noses... look at him, real hard man...”

“Pssh, hard liquor man maybe. He’s peeling the paint off the walls.”

“Yeah yeah, real funny guys. Look. I’ve got something. Blood sample. Took it from a crime scene before it washed away.”

“Well, howdjya know it was a crime scene?”

“And that’s technically considered ‘contaminating a crime scene’, right?”

“Like I said, it WAS a crime scene, blood all over a back alley, washed away in the rain. I can’t contaminate a scene if it’s washed away though, now can I? I just thought it might have something to do with my friends...”

“Why? Where did you find it?”

“Behind a local pub... a place I hear has something of a reputation...”

“Oh ho... now we’re getting somewhere. You know what, Kyle, I think Mike here has been holding out on us...”

“Ya think?”

“Yeah... he sat across that very desk from us, and he didn’t say one word about there being anything bent about his friends... suddenly he comes in, gibberin about blood and crime scenes and local pubs... and we know where he’s talking bout... something fishy there.”

“Hey guys, guys. Like I told you before, I was just poking around. Heard a few guys had been seen around, sounded like my friends, went to have a look. But you know me, I’m a good boy... I found something, so did I go busting in and breaking noses? Nooooo. I came straight to you. Just like you told me.”

“Well... that’s very clever and all, Mike. So you’ve got some blood, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, not to put too fine a point on this, but what the fuck does that tell us, exactly?”

“Yeah. Think about it for a second... you’ve got blood. That doesn’t really tell us how it got there, who put it there, hell, it doesn’t even tell us whose it is.”

The vaporous flaw in Mike’s reasoning became apparent to him. He had been relying on the blood and his description of the crime scene as impetus to spur the local authorities into action. More and more, as the fuzziness of alcohol was replaced with the sharpness of sobriety, Mike began to appreciate the detective’s position. *It’s late, cold, and pissing down so badly even this shithole is starting to wash clean... no way these guys are going to do anything tonight... and then morning will come, they’ll hand over... and it’s someone else’s problem.*

And in the meantime, nothing gets done. Straight, crooked, it doesn't matter which they are... either means I'm going to get the same result.

“Well... well, I was thinking... we, my friends and I, well, we all came in through American airports. So... don't they have DNA samples? Isn't there something you can compare against? Something that might tell you if this blood came from one of my friends?”

“Mike, Mike... we don't do the tests. Tell ya what, keep going down the hall... Kyle will show you the way... forensics is down there... give them your nosebleed, they'll take a look. That way, if they find anything, it's all official, brought in by Detective Sloan here... and if not, then you're the one that looks like the idiot. Sound reasonable?”

“Perfectly... whatever I've gotta do to be helpful, guys.”

Assholes... happy to steal my thunder if I'm on to something, but too chicken shit to take it in themselves. Still, maybe not quite as indifferent as I first thought... at least they didn't just tell me to piss off.

*

Sloan had shown Mike the way to forensics, had walked in and spoken to the lab administrator, pointed out that if anything came from the testing that he should be contacted right away, smiled a vacant grin at Mike, and trundled back to

his desk. Mike sat down in a small waiting room, until someone could come out and see him.

“Uhm, is there someone here named Mike?”

A cute blonde girl in a labcoat poked her head around into the waiting room. 20-something, and while attractive in an almost generic way, she really didn't seem to have anything distinguishing about her. Finally she down at Mike, sitting soggily in his wet coat and damp hat, and gave a bright smile.

“Guess that's you, huh cowboy? Can you bring your sample in... may as well see what you've got.”

“Sure thing, miss. I'd take off my coat, but, I'm trying not to spoil the little evidence I have by dropping it, or getting anything else spilt in it...”

“Anything else? Oh my. I'm getting the feeling this might take some time... come this way...”

Mike stood up, and walked past the forensic investigator into the laboratory. She made a face as he passed, and smiled slightly.

“There's a bathroom you can clean yourself off in, soon as we're done, just down the hall okay?”

“Yes ma’am... sorry, I was just trying to keep warm on a dark and stormy night.”

“Here, lemme help get you out of that jacket.”

Shame she only wants to stop me dripping on the floor.

“My name is Sarah, by the way...”

*

“Six days.”

“WHAT?”

“That’s how long it’ll take to get the comparison samples from the airports, and to do the DNA testing to compare the donors. And that’s if we’re very lucky, and I can get through to them tonight, and this sample comes back as even giving a single donor.”

“In six days... in six days, a lot of things could happen...”

Like in six days, my friends could be dead. In six days, I could find their bodies, cut up and hanging in a warehouse or something. In six days... I could do something stupid...

“In six days, we’ll have something conclusive. Anything before then is guess work. I’ll let you know, soon as I have anything. Right after I tell Detectives Sloan and Lafferty, of course... and you know that we can’t use anything in court, it’d just be somewhere to start, right?”

“Yeah, I understand. But you’ll keep in touch?”

“Sure Mike... sure I will. I don’t know where your friends are, but if this helps someone find them, I’ll do my best to make that happen. I like you, Mike.

She’s flirting with me...

“But, you know, there’s something you can do for me...”

Okay, now she’s coming on a little strong...

“You can throw that jacket into an evidence bag... if, like you said, you got blood on it from the alley, I’m going to need to take that too.”

Damn.

“Uhhh... yeah. Well, about that. Have you seen outside? It’s freezing cold... and I don’t exactly carry a spare... out of town and all. Any chance I could hang onto it, you know, for a few days?”

“Not a chance in hell, Mike. After all, it might help me find your friends.”

“Damn.”

Mike gingerly took off his jacket, folded it over his arm before stuffing it into an evidence bag. A shiver ran down his spine, whether from the cold or from feeling vulnerable now that he was underdressed, he couldn't say.

“Anything on the hat?”

“No, no I'll be keeping my damn hat, thank you... not a drop. I'll need something to wear on the walk home, after all.”

“Oh, your camera... here, here's a spare lens cap. Do I want to know what's on it?”

“Uhm... no, no you don't. Another case I'm working on... might help me pay the bills, while I'm staying in town.”

“Well, if paying the bills is a problem, Mike... you can always cut back on the booze. Right? Ha. Seriously though, if you need a little extra work while you are here, I think the boys in blue still offer small cash rewards for people who turn in vandals, street thugs, that sort of thing. You can even use your camera, catch them in the act... it wouldn't be much, but it might help you pay for your stay... maybe even get you a new coat.”

“Well, I appreciate the advice... but Sarah... I want my coat back, when you’re done. That coat and I have been through some rough times together... and... it’s the only coat that goes with my hat.”

“Really Mike? You? A fashion conscious metrosexual? I’d never have guessed. I’ll be in touch. Oh, and Mike?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful, it’s a jungle out there.”

When someone asks you if you're a god, you say YES!

I've found something. A bloody something. A big pool of it. I didn't think blood would pool on dirt, but there you go. It's human, judging by the amount, the footprints. I'm near some "peaceful village", or at least that's what they'd have you believe. Peaceful village with barbed wire fences, and pools of blood. Curiouser and curiouser. I've made a friend out here, some local law enforcement type. She's cute, and completely ineffectual. It's nice to know there are people out here, anyway. I tried talking to the other cop-types, they're not listening. Don't give a shit, or paid not to give a shit. Fuck, I think one of them is a park ranger or something, anyway. Still, it's not like I came flaming out of the sky or anything, like a tiny, fleshy GOD or anything.

Chapter 4: Jonathon.

Dahvit led Jonathon to a tower standing near the centre of AlphaPrime, a guiding hand on his shoulder as he spoke in an animated fashion about the wonders of the city. Jonathon tried to listen attentively, but he found himself lulled by the monotonous tone of Dahvit's delivery, and he was soon mumbling incoherent and distracted replies as his thoughts shifted inwards. Suddenly, they were at the entrance to the tower. With little preamble, Dahvit pushed Jonathon into the arms of two armoured men, who in turn quickly restrained him. Gasping for breath, and fighting to free himself, Jonathon scrabbled to catch hold of Dahvit.

"Dave, man, what the hell is going on?!"

"Don't worry, Relic Jonathon... it is simply time for your implantation... I will see you afterwards. Good day."

Smiling calmly at him, Dahvit walked away. Jonathon belatedly realised Dahvit's voice had lost its calming monotonous harmonic, and had returned to its normal, slightly high pitched level. *Damnit... the wanker conned me! He just led me here, calm as you like... for god knows what.* Panicking now, Jonathon tried to twist free, but the guards holding him struck him from behind and he slumped limply in their arms.

*

...drill bits... where did I see drill bits? What the hell... why can't I see anything now... what the hell is that buzzing noise? Where am I? Jonathon came to groggily, with a pinching pain in his face. Carefully reaching up, he felt around his ear and jawline, but aside from some tenderness nothing felt amiss. Sitting up carefully, Jonathon found himself in a now open room, lying on a small bed. Outside, people casually walked past, and Jonathon moved gingerly outside. Dizzy and disoriented, overcome with vertigo, he slumped against the outside wall and slid to the ground.

What the hell did they do to me... I... drills? I think... they've done something to me... something to my face... gotta get outta here, now...

*

Jonathon stormed across the gleaming pearl of AlphaPrime, oblivious now to the marvels surrounding him, and the blank stares of the people he rudely pushed past. When Dahvit had told him of the world outside the protective bubble of the city, he'd at first been excited. Now he just felt angry. Moving hurriedly from one place to another, Jonathon finally stopped when he found a reflective surface. There, finally able to examine his aching face, he saw a faint scar along his jaw and sliding up along his cheek, and saw a faint splattering of blood along his collar. Quickly hiding the collar, Jonathon checked his other injuries, and found they had been tended to while he was unconscious.

Jonathon tried to understand what had happened. The more time he spent thinking, the angrier he became. He felt violated. And as he realized the callous and casual manner in which he had been abused, he became frightened. Looking around, he could see no one in the least bit disturbed by his appearance or obvious anger... and then it hit him. *They're not just calm around me... they're calm around everything... they're like... zombies or something. Just wandering around, controlled. And now there is something in me too... is it going to make me like them?*

His anger simmering, Jonathon began to look around AlphaPrime in earnest for the first time. Walking down narrow alleyways and concealed side-streets, Jonathon started to feel uncomfortable. He felt like he was being watched, but couldn't explain why. *Everywhere I look, people are getting new gadgets, toys... shops are everywhere... but nobody seems to be paying for anything. And they're all... so quiet, sedated.* Jonathon walked into what he could only assume was a store, and poked around.

"Greetings, Relic, how can I aid you?"

"Yeah, hey... hey hang on a minute, how come you speak English too?"

"Oh, is that what this is called? What a delightful name... it sounds so convoluted, makes me spit a little when I say it... wonderful. Well, Relic, my augment has taught me your language. Whenever a new Relic arrives, Vector

ensures all eartech and speaktech becomes empowered to communicate. Otherwise, how else would we welcome you and learn from you?”

“Eartech huh... is that what this is?”

Jonathon pointed forcefully to his scar, and winced slightly as his finger accidentally brushed against it.

“Why yes, of course. I see you’ve been augmented already. It seems you’ve somehow missed the orientation class that normally follows a successful augment, Relic.”

“Uhhh yeah... and can you drop ‘Relic’? You can call me... just call me Steve.”

“Yet Steve is not your name, Relic.”

“What?”

“My eartech corrected your error. I am informed your name is Jonathon, Relic. It is a unique experience meeting with you.”

“The ear thing... what else does it do?”

What else is it going to do to me? Is it doing it already?!

“I’m not certain how to put this in your terminology, so I’ll trust in the speaktech to convey my meaning. Essentially the eartech provides an interpretive filter to the audio waves you project, whereupon they are completely absorbed, and transformed into audio waves I can interpret using the language centre of my brain. Similarly, because you are not familiar with your own augments yet, my speaktech completely absorbs audio waves I produce to communicate, and reproduces them as audio waves you can interpret. If you were to use your own, of course, that would not be necessary. In time, it shall come to you.”

Jonathon found himself rubbing at his temple, unconsciously feeling for his own implant. Suddenly, a scowl crossed his face.

“Woaaaah, wait a minute. You’re telling me you can only hear and say what the earthingy and speakdoodad let you? That’s... nuts.”

“Oh no, it is quite... sane. Insane? You find this process insane? How else are we to communicate, if not by isolation filter technology?”

“You could try learning my language... or I could try learning yours... or hey, don’t kidnap people from the past that speak other languages, that one works too.”

“Ah, now you are jesting with me. We don’t have time to learn entirely new and redundant ways of communicating with our Relic population, Jonathon. We are far too busily employed elsewhere.”

“But what is it you do... I mean, this is a store, or I thought it was, but you’re not really selling anything... you’re just kind of sitting there, smiling and waiting to talk to people... and outside, everyone, they’re just walking around, smiling, talking, singing even. When do you people work?”

“Work? As in manual exertions? Why, we haven’t done that since before Vector. No, Relic Jonathon, we no longer exert our physical forms on mindless and repetitive labours, Vector does all that needs doing... we instead devote ourselves to leading long and fruitful lives, learning of cultures and interaction between different and same, and seeking to better ourselves individually before our final rest.”

“Well uhh, that sounds... neat. Say... Vector... how does he give you your... augments?”

“Why... at the weekly Gifting. It is there that Vector provides us with all manner of wondrous and innovative things to amuse ourselves. Each week brings new and exciting devices to the people of AlphaPrime... why, just last week I received the televisual display, and the week before, I received a musical reproduction device, capable of storing a vast library of compositions. And the week before that, I received wheeled foot garments, capable of providing exercise and increasing movement speed, whilst improving balance and reflexes in their wearer, over time. Truly wondrous.”

*

What a bloody nightmare... whoever Vector is, he's turned these poor bastards into sheep. Look at them... that guys got a sodding Gameboy, for god's sake! This is just scavenged crap... gimmicks! That guy is riding a plastic bike. What the hell have I walked into? I've gotta get out of here... and the guys... they aren't here, they're out there, somewhere. Or back there... how the hell do I get back? Or out? I need to find out more... I can't stay...and if I drink that funny water, I might end up like them... Amber drops... this whole place is a bloody amber drop.

The further Jonathon walked, the more people he encountered, the more disturbingly familiar things became. The objects that seemed to adorn the citizens of AlphaPrime were rapidly becoming far more mundane than he had initially thought. Numerous variations on the watch, the thermometer, the pedometer were abundant, intermingled with entertainment devices that ranged from the evolutionary to the downright primitive, but nowhere among the general populace did he encounter anything unthinkably advanced. Except for the unseen augments. And nowhere else in the city itself, bar the shield. Jonathon had slowly worked his way down to the ground levels of AlphaPrime, in the hope that he could gain a glimpse of what lay outside the shield. Instead, bordering alongside the inner edge, Jonathon encountered something of a park, presumably intended to serve as something of a memoriam to nature, in a city that had survived the death of the wild.

Approaching the shield, Jonathon felt the hairs on his body begin to stand on end. *Alright... shield... so how the hell do you work?* He dug around in his pockets, found them empty, looked around in the pseudo-park, and came across something that was an adequate facsimile of a rock. Glancing around, to make sure he was unobserved in this relatively isolated part of AlphaPrime, Jonathon turned and hurled the rock full force into the shield. Nothing happened, no sparks, no alarms or cracks. The rock simply hit the surface of the shield, and slid down to land amongst the faux grass. Stooping to retrieve the rock, Jonathon accidentally knocked it with his hand. He watched, amazed, as the rock rolled down a slight incline near the base of the shield, and slipped underneath. *Oh, come off it, you've got to be bloody kidding me. It doesn't reach the ground? HAH.* Careful not to touch the edge of the shield, Jonathon began to excavate the ground near where the rock had rolled underneath. Sure enough, he managed to slip his hand underneath the shield, and with only a tingling sensation. *Weird that I can't see through the shield, but underneath, it looks just like normal ground outside. There's even a breeze blowing in... I've had enough of this place... time to go...*

*

... stupid, stupid bastard... what were you thinking!

Jonathon smiled. He smiled like his life depended upon it. As far as he knew, it did. Smiling back at him were three people. Three people from outside the shield. Three people with the biggest, meanest looking guns Jonathon had ever

seen. Pointed straight at his face. *Keep bloody smiling... Christ, I hope these implant things work now...*

“Hey there...”

“How old are you?”

Jonathon was momentarily taken aback, as surprised at the success of his augments as he was at the tone of the reply.

“Wha?”

“I said, how fucking old are you!”

“Oh... really bloody old, man. Before the dawn of sodding time, compared to this place...”

“Good enough for me... quick quick, make with the moving man, we’re outta here. Put the ordnance away, he’s oldtimer... not another spy. We’ve gotta move, oldtimer, Vector is going to send someone for you soon... another cull, another hunt... we need to get you away, safe-like.”

“Oh, yeah, I love this place... it’s always an adventure...”

Still... at least these guys have got enough sense to point guns first, ask questions after... maybe got enough sense not to drink the funny water too, by the look of things.

“Oh yeah, Burner’s the name. C’mon move, oldtimer. Jet, let’s get to the slogger.”

*

In the end, they had only made it ten minutes away from the shield before they had been caught. Jonathon had been running with the others, breathlessly wheezing from the exertion but still keeping pace, when suddenly a shadow had dropped down over him. Turning, he saw beside him an awe inspiring figure dressed in a brilliantly azure carapace, silently hovering three feet from the ground. *What a nice shade of blue...* Before he could say anything, an exotic weapon had smashed into the side of his face, and Jonathon had crumpled slowly to the ground. Around him, hot blasts of energy fire glazed the sand into myriad patterns. The scorched sands reflected prisms of light at Jonathon as he lay cataleptic in their midst. *Whrrr...*

...rrrthehellwasthat? Jonathon had been shaken into consciousness, one of Burner’s companions leaning over him, giving him a concerned look. Around them was darkness, with only a small amount of ambient light giving any illumination. Fingers were pressed to his lips, indicating to Jonathon that presumably he wasn’t to talk. He had an uneasy sensation that he was being

moved, which became no less unnerving when he heard a sharp, piercing scream from somewhere outside the darkness. It was quickly followed by another, then another, and suddenly his whole world span as the darkness, Jonathon, Burner and his friends were all flung wildly before landing with another consciousness-stealing thud.

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Woken again by Burner's friend, this time Jonathon found it was he who was screaming. Screaming along at well over 200kph. Jonathon sat glassy eyed, reflexively clasping his hand to the welded framework of his current vehicle for dear life as it went bouncing over the dried, burnt landscape. *It's bloody Mad Max... without Tina Turner.* Ahead, directly ahead thankfully or Jonathon's tearing eyes would never have seen it, appeared a ramshackle town, a dark stain on the already dark horizon. The vehicle came slamming to a stop in the middle of town, plumes of dust in its wake. The driver, Burner and the other passengers hopped out, and then leaned back in to pull the muscle-locked Jonathon from the skeleton of the vehicle. Patting him on the back, walking off to greet their loved ones, Jonathon could only stand dazed and confused in the middle of the town, dark brown dust caking his clothes.

“ALRIGHT! What the hell is going on... this time!”

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“And that is all we know about it.”

“So you just woke up, the vehicle was wrecked, and there were bodies everywhere?”

“Not quite... only one body was there... the rest... well, there were a few pieces.”

“So what the hell happened?”

“Well, we got caught... you remember that bit, right? Blue guys, jump jets. Stun guns so bad they sear the sand to glass they’re so intense, man. They stuffed us into a transport, like they normally would... but something went wrong. It’s like... it was like, they went mad and killed each other or something. There’s nothing... nothing else out here that could do that. Nothing at all man. But we didn’t stop, right? We just grabbed our ordnance, ran back to the slogger, threw your soggy meat in, and took off for the sunset, like.”

“Well... thanks and all... but fat lot of good that does me. Crap. So Vector... you guys really don’t know who he is?”

“Not a clue man. We just live out here... we scavenge old tech, build it into new tech... kinda our thing, right? We’re tinkers. Fiddlers. Few mad bastards too... you met three of the maddest, in me an’ Jet an’ Trigga.”

“And... you just live out here... and then what? Vector sends... patrols? He takes you away? So... so your people could be those zombies inside, right? With their bloody roller blades and hedonistic lifestyle?”

“Mebbe... mebbe not. No one has ever been stupid enough to go back in, by choice... or stupid enough to come back out afterwards, either, right? That place where you dug out, that was mebbe luck... that won't be there now. AlphaPrime changes, as Vector wants it to. He... we think mebbe he wants you oldtimers to escape. You're not the first. Did they tell you that, inside? That over 30 of the oldtimers got out, through gardens and climbing frames and whatever else, over the last 200 years maybe? Yeah, didn't think so.”

“But why... what good am I, out here? He bloody brought me here, in the first place.”

“Stuffed if we're going to ever know, man. Only Vector knows what's going on in AlphaPrime... and they're too busy rounding us up to talk with us about it.”

Jonathon sat back, tired from listening to Burner's story. He had learned that Burner's village was part of a large, quasi nomadic community of people that lived outside of AlphaPrime. Not people who had escaped, primarily. They seemed to have been heavily influenced by cultures similar to Jonathon's own, too. *Maybe its from the others they've grabbed... who knows?* They called themselves the Interlopers. They had improvised their own weapons, vehicles and

even communications and computers from the shattered detritus of humanity from ages past, aided in part by what appeared to be a technological proclivity that seemed second to none. While they talked, Jonathon couldn't help noticing that Burner had kept fingering his firearm, looking over his shoulder. *They're not just a scavenger people, a nomadic people... they're a people being hunted... he sits there, fidgeting, always looking. He's always ready to run... this doesn't look good at all.* Jonathon was about to ask another question when suddenly a sharp pain shot through his temples.

"Grahagh knashtik huh?"

What the hell? Who said that?

"Damn... looks like Vector's prohibtin' your speech, must have finally noticed you're not back when ya should be, man... not good..."

November 5th

Okay, so shit hit fan. I decided, after snooping, that I was actually in a military camp, using the town as cover. So I ran. Obviously I'm not very sneaky, and half an hour out I was recaptured. I think I'd be in deep shit right now if someone didn't come along... I don't know what happened, but the van I was in crashed, and then the guards were dead. Un-crash related, if you ask me. And now I'm with some other people from outside, they were in the van too. I think I've met "la resistance". The worst part is, they're all kids.

Thought for the day: Seatbelts save lives. Sometimes.

Chapter 4: Erik.

Erik awoke to find the sky was blue, the air was clear, and the impossible stars had faded from the sky. Erik hadn't slept well, disturbed by the inane chatter of the fairy-folk, who were incapable of taking a hint. Erik had tried asking them to be quiet, ignoring them, and in one particularly irritated moment trying to bite one that alighted on his lip. As a result, he had slept fitfully, shifting in and out of consciousness and achieving very little of the sorely needed rest his body craved. Yawning and rubbing warmth into his cold body, Erik sat up and looked around, staring blearily at the remains of dragon carcass. *Green.* Erik yawned again.

"Morning, Ming. Oh, I see, still giving me the cold shoulder?"

Ah well, the sun is shining and it's warm. Plenty of fresh water too. Guess it's time to find some breakfast. Without warning or preamble, a rather fresh and recently dead pigeon-like bird fell into his lap. Above, Erik could hear the faint chatter of the fairy people.

"We thought you might be a bit peckish..."

"...Came across this bird-thing sitting in a tree, so we stabbed it to death for you..."

"Don't mind sharing, I hope?"

"Oh hello... you're still here. Look, thanks for the bird... uhm, I guess I just didn't expect to see you. Here, right now, I mean. Maybe I need another drink. Off to the river... unless, I don't suppose you have one handy?"

“Only booze... and none for you, big feet.”

“Oh gwan, give him a drop... he’s looking dead on his feet...”

“Geez, can you imagine how many lizards you’d have to kill to make boots for those things...”

“*yawn* Well, you know what they say about people with big feet...”

“Yeah, your toenails are enormous. Still, it’s nice to spend our morning with a hero”

“He’s no hero, you stupid bastard, he’s just some moron from beyond the miasma...”

“Yeah, but you know beyond the miasma, people are all heroes...”

“Pssh, like Jared was? Please.”

Trying to put the ensuing argument out of his mind, Erik gathered some firewood, started a cooking fire and made a spit for the small bird, while the entire time the little creatures chattered around him. After getting the fire going, and checking that his carrion tent had fared well in the stiff breezes of the night before, Erik walked stiffly down to the river to wash the sleep from his eyes. The fairy-folk stayed behind and alternated between turning the spit, and throwing punches. They were shrilly shrieking the entire time, more than audible in the quiet morning. Erik presumed it was for his benefit. Rejuvenated from the fresh water, Erik returned and sat down with the diminutive fairies, and together they tore into the steaming bird.

“Yhmm, this is good. I don’t suppose uhm, you fairies... do you know anything else good to eat around here?”

“Fairies? We’re three of the Saibhre... and there’s nothing for you to eat, bigling.”

“Well... there is the fishes...”

“Too bloody fast to stab, stupid fishes... hard to swim after them with wings and all, y’know.”

“Fish... now that’d be a nice dinner... shame I haven’t got any bait.”

Erik took a sideways look at the Saibhre sitting opposite him. With their translucent, sparkling wings and faces covered in the grease of the bird, the three fairies literally blazed in the morning sunlight. *Hmm... shiny...* Erik quietly watched as the Saibhre argued amongst themselves. *They scarcely stop to breathe... Good lung capacity hmm...* Erik got up, wiped the oily bird fat off his fingers, and went over to check his intestine ropes. Finding a thin thread had already dried, he pulled it down from where it was hooked, coiled it neatly around his hand, and carefully bundled it next to Ming.

“Say... how do you guys feel about swimming?”

“Well, its fine... we’re not so great at it, mind... but y’know... we’re always up for a challenge...”

“Aye, and we can really make a big splash too, when we jump in...”

“Oh really... I’d love to see that...”

Erik began rooting around amongst the edge of the forest, looking for a long stick. *No point maybe risking pissing off the shee, breaking off a new branch or whatever... last thing I need is an arrow sticking out of my eye.* Finding a

broken branch about two metres long, and very slender, Erik began to pluck off the peripheral twigs and neaten the edges. Placing the cleanly edged staff on the ground near the string, Erik again sat down in front of the Saibhre. *I wonder...*

“Guys... you know how you were saying before... well, I am a hero... and... I could use your help. I was wondering... what do you guys think of my little house?”

“Oh, tis grand enough, I spose. Couldn’t hurt to get some stained glass in there or something...”

“Eejit, where’s he going to stick stained glass on a dragon-skinned tent?”

“Oh, I don’t know... maybe a flagpole then...”

“Wouldn’t hurt to do something about the smell... dragon gizzard isn’t exactly much of an enticing, homey aroma...”

“Does have something a bit grand about it though... the smell of the kill, the glory of the ages...”

“Smells like bloody dead snake to me, only with a bit of brimstone and sulfur kicked in, for that added nose blasting effect...”

“Right, right... all good points. See, those are great ideas, but I think it is missing something else... like a flagpole maybe? But, well, I don’t really need something that’ll make my tent blow over even more now, do I. Say... how about a mantelpiece?”

“Oh, good idea!”

“...Need a bloody mantel first, don’t you, bigling...”

“Shut yer mouth, tis a grand idea... maybe... maybe some sort of door ornament...”

“Hey, I’ve got a brilliant idea... how about that dragon head! I could make a little pole, and hang it outside the tent... very imposing, very hero-like, wouldn’t you say? All I really need is a little help... well... cleaning it, getting it ready. Think you could help out? I’ll make it worth your while... let you guys come along on my next grand adventure...”

Huddling together, the Saibhre appeared to be considering Erik’s offer. Watching them closely, Erik moved over to the severed dragon’s head, piled on top of the unused carcass material a short distance from his camp. Dragging the head back, he found the fairies had finished their discussion, and were waiting impatiently for him.

“We’ve decided to help...”

“But only if we get to go on the next adventure...”

“And only if you help make us a home too... we’re sick of sleeping in trees... with those big hands of yours, you look like you could make something for us...”

“Done. Okay... first things first, I’ve got to tie up the openings of the head... don’t want flies crawling in and out of it, right?”

*

Setting the fairies to work, Erik managed to create a pole for the dragon’s severed head, removed the arrow from inside the eye socket, and sealed the neck wound. In the meantime, he put the Saibhre to work mucking out the brains and

soft tissue from inside the skull, and removing as much of the elven remains as possible. After an hour and a half of cleaning, Erik took the skull down to the river, washed it out, and hung it on a pole over the tent.

“Okay guys... one last thing, I need you to clean the teeth...”

“You’re kidding...”

“What in the hells name for? They’re not going to get holes or nothing!”

“Bah... stupid ‘hero’ wants his dragon to look all shiny... hardly menacing if it’s got time to pick his teeth is he?”

Erik urged the diminutive Saibhre inside the skull, and watched as they all climbed in and began to scrub at the teeth. Making sure that they weren’t watching, he reached down and grabbed his length of string and held it inside his hand. He then found a large rock in the scrub nearby, and put it into his pocket quickly.

“Okay guys... now the back ones... watch the roof, erm, roof of his mouth... I’d hate for you to get squished...”

As the Saibhre moved into the back of the jaw, Erik shot his hand out and slammed the mouth shut. Quickly, he tied the jaw shut, as he heard the fairies cursing and swearing from inside. Suddenly, a very tiny, angry face appeared in the punctured eye socket.

“What the bloody hell do ya think ya doin!”

Carefully, Erik grabbed the Saibhre from the eye socket, and holding him firmly, he stuffed the rock from his pocket into the now empty socket. Grabbing another length of string, Erik wrapped the Saibhre tightly in thread, before quickly tying it in a knot. Held on the length of string, Erik had a tied, furious Saibhre buzzing and flapping and swearing, whilst hollow curse words rose from inside the sealed dragon's head.

“Okay... well, the next big adventure is lunch... and you get to come along...”

“Hey now! Let me go! You can't do this to... hey... what do you mean lunch?”

“We're going fishing... and you... you're the bait. I thought you guys liked adventure?”

“Oh we do! Bait? Oh! I've never been bait before... how do I do it?”

Erik tied the length of string onto the branch he had put aside before, tying it securely. He then tied on the unusually barbed arrowhead from an elven shaft onto the string, dangling a few inches below the Saibhre.

“But... what do I do?”

“Just hold your breath... and be shiny... hey, that reminds me...”

Erik slathered the Saibhre in the remaining bird meat from breakfast, covering him in a thin layer of oil.

“Bu...”

“Don’t worry... it’ll keep you warm... and this was your idea!”

“B....”

“And you’ve already told me you like swimming... and you guys can hold your breath forever... so lets go...”

Erik made a few experimental swings of his impromptu rod, as the Saibhre made delighted noises as he flew through the air.

*

In the end, it turned out Erik could have just asked any of the Saibhre for their help. After a few bites and nibbles, and much spluttering, the Saibhre had finally managed to point out that the hook had fallen from the string. He was having a brilliant time, however, so he offered to help by wiggling and looking seductively fish-like. He would then stab the fish when they came close for a nibble. Finding this much more efficient, Erik and his ‘bait’ had then caught 3 fish, one for lunch and dinner, and one for the others. When they’d eventually returned to the camp, they found that the other Saibhre had worked the dragon’s jaw open, and escaped. They’d grown to rather like living in a dragon’s head, and had cut the mouth open, and set to making small wooden furniture. There was even a tiny piece of quartz in the eye socket, stuffed in where the rock had been.

The dripping Saibhre proceeded to tell his companions about the thrill of fishing, while the others simultaneously demonstrated the comfortable living space they had made in his absence, all in a high pitched chatter. Bemused, Erik sat down and began to cook and eat the fish. *I thought for sure they'd just disappear when I had something else to eat.*

*

In just a few days, Erik's life had settled into a comfortable rhythm. In the mornings, he and the Saibhre went fishing, and after that Erik would send them out for some peace. In the meantime, he would pack up Ming and go wandering in the nearby forest, setting snares to try and catch fresh game. Erik tried to keep in mind the many bizarre warnings he had been given by the Saibhre, watching for the dreaded Hinkypunk, and taking care not to name any Boggarts if he crossed their path. On his fourth day after setting up his camp, Ming and Erik had ventured across the river, in hope of finding food, or even a shady place to rest by the water. *Like they say, the grass is greener...* Erik sat back closed his eyes tight for a moment, hoping to affect just such a change, with no luck. *I guess it is a bit much to expect delusions to work on demand.*

Silently tying another intestine-string trap to a young sapling, Erik heard footfalls crunching through wet leaves behind him. Turning, he couldn't see anyone nearby, but could still hear the noise. It appeared to be coming from the bottom of a shallow dip behind some trees. As quietly as possible, Erik crept over to a better vantage point. Underneath him, he found he could make out a faint

trail, all but hidden by dead leaves and bushy undergrowth. Through the cover, he could see hooves... but he could also hear the faint noise of conversation.

“I’m not seeing anyone...”

“Keep looking... we know he’s going to be here somewhere...”

Leaning in for a closer look, trying to peer between two branches, Erik overextended and found himself sliding down the loose earth. *Oh buggggeeerrrrrrr...* He landed directly in the middle of the path, sitting on his rump. Looking up, he found several halberds pointed into his face, while behind him he heard the tensile twang of a crossbow being cocked. *Phew, not centaurs, just...armed guards.* Making an already tense moment more tense, Ming chose that moment in time to come following Erik down the hill, rolling out of his carrying jacket and landing uncovered at Erik’s feet. For a moment, nobody moved. *I wonder if I try talking to them, if they’ll suddenly know English.*

“Uhm... hi? Oh, sorry about that...”

“What the bleedin hell is this? Urgh, what’s that smell...”

“It’s a...”

“It’s a severed arm, Sergeant.”

“Oh no no, it’s...”

“And it looks like it’s his, Sir.”

Erik could see the situation rapidly getting out of hand. Slowly, carefully, gingerly, he raised his hands and knelt over, and reached for Ming. As he slid forward, his necklace draped out of his shirt and slid to hang from his neck. On the chain hung a bushido cross, a curved cross contained in a square piece of metal.

“Look, look Sir! The mark!”

“Quickly men, arrest him!”

Just then the Saibhre came shooting out of the trees, brandishing tiny swords and aiming for the eyes of the soldiers.

“Damnable Saibhre! Quick, the leaf!”

One of the soldiers reached into his pouch, and flung a handful of thin leaves onto the ground. Suddenly, the Saibhre flew away, screaming angry threats and making gagging noises.

“Damned copóg Phádraig... goodbye bigling... we can’t help you now!”

Erik looked up at the retreating Saibhre, and turned to face the now bleeding soldiers. *Oh bugger...* Erik turned to run, but the still mounted Sergeant kicked him viciously in the face. And then more soldiers were upon him. A sharp blow caught him in behind his ear, and with a groan Erik crumpled unconscious to the ground.

Day 5.

Today has not been my finest. Out in the wild, I set up a lean-to, did some fishing, found some water that didn't seem too foul and boiled it up, just to be sure. I was making do, or at least I thought I was. Then these hideous things came running at me, I don't know what I thought was happening... I started pummeling them, fighting back, and then they knocked me out. I woke up here, in some small town or something. It turns out some soldiers found me, out in the wilds, and I started screaming and beating at them or something. I'd been hallucinating, alright... they said it was some drug that dripped off some of the trees... it sounds so stupid, but they might be onto something. I do remember seeing the most wonderful flower.

Chapter 4: Will.

Sprinting through the night, Will was almost perfectly camouflaged. Lithe, covered sleekly in long, dark fur, he blended into the shadows. The woodland around him only further obscured his image. Leaping from tree to ground, sprinting along animal trails, long grasses whipping against his fur, Will dashed through the thick jungle with ease. Ahead, Cyntia's scent carried thinly in the air, and Will doggedly followed it, unmindful of the mayhem and chaos he left in his wake. Reptiles slithered and scampered away in the darkness, just as large animals ran blindly in between the trees, falling amongst loose, mossy rocks in their eagerness to escape the death that ran amongst them. Birds flew into the sky, not a cry made amongst them, lest it bring down the wrath of the creature. The landscape around him changed, the jungles impossibly giving way to snowy steppes, the air becoming brusque and Will's breath fogging as he ran. Underground, rabbits and other tunnel-life cowered, trapped and waiting for the grasping claw that would end their existence, a blow that never came. The world around changed from verdant green to barren white, as the sky above faded from daylight to an arctic night. And he sensed it all, every cowering mammal. Those his eyes could not see, his ears pinpointed by their heartbeats, by their whimpers, and his nose tracked, by their fearful odour, leaving a fiery splotch against his mind's eye. Ignoring it all, the animals, the snow, Will followed the one scent that mattered. Cyntia. His progenitor, his mentor. His savior. And she ran on ahead, testing Will's newfound strength, his speed, his hunger. Testing his resolve.

*Why has this happened? What have I become? I should have died, but here I am, stronger than anyone... stronger than anything... Trees fall down from my lightest touch, the ground blurs under my sprinting legs, and I don't tire. Snow sprays behind me, powdery, and I don't feel cold. And she's leading me on. She's taking me somewhere... to show me something. But she's not telling me what it is, she's just... just showing me. I... I'm a monster... but it doesn't matter... nothing matters... nothing. I'm hungry, so I will eat. And then? Then I'll do as I please... I'm... **I'm unstoppable. Unkillable!** I lose an arm... and it grows back. I die... and I come back. What is there to fear now? **There is nothing.** Is there a name for what I am? Something... I must be something. What... just what am I?*

Ahead, Cyntia's scent had begun to pool into a single area, just up on a small rise. Slowing his pace to a careful walk, Will silently approached her. Seeing her directly, finally he could get a sense of what she was. Hunched over, lithe and graceful, she resembled a cat. Her ears were small and pointed, and her mouth concealed all but the tips of her feline teeth. Her fur seemed oddly vibrant against the snowy surroundings, but she lay so low as to be invisible to anyone below her. It was her eyes that most resembled a cat's though, he saw as she turned to face him. She motioned Will to silence with an eerie wave of her paw. Her eyes glowed in the night, illuminated by the moon lighting the frozen sky, the glow of the set sun still reflecting just over the horizon. Her long-slit pupils dilated as her eyes roamed the snowy banks ahead, searching for something. At first Will thought she was jet black, as dark as the night was to human eyes, but then he saw the faint, darkened patches of spotting covering her fur. *Jaguar*

spots... she's a jaguar. But since when are jaguars black? Creeping up slowly to kneel beside her, Will hunched down and let his senses roam the night.

The first thing he heard was his breathing, hard and deep. Then his heartbeat, slow and steady. Then Cyntia's quiet breath, then her heartbeat. Will almost thought he could faintly hear their breath freezing on the winter air. For a time, nothing else carried to his ears, just the jungle drumbeats of their hearts, and the icy breezes of air. Animals remained silent. *What's that?* His ears pricking up, Will turned to his left, sharply. A faint, yet irritatingly high pitched scrape echoed through the night. It repeated. Again, and again. Growing louder each time. Not animal... not natural... *it's man made... whatever it is, it's man made...* Will hunched under himself, preparing to leap into the gully below, to track down whatever made the noise. A restraining paw pressed against his chest, and again Cyntia motioned for Will to be silent, be still. Straining his ears to follow the sound, Will noticed more detail. A muffled noise. Shifting, people shifting on wood. A faint knocking sound, just once, of someone hitting something hollow. And then a loud knock, followed by cursing. And always, the scraping noise, growing closer. Slowly, inexorably the noise approached. And then suddenly it all became clear. Will saw it, rounding a snowy path between the drifts. Obscured by two stout horses, a large wooden sledge was drawn into view. The horses snorted as they sensed Will, and they began to shy nervously away from his concealed vantage point.

Driving the sledge were men, as out of place as the snow around them was. They wore tabards over their fur armour, like Norsemen, and carried ancient

weapons. Sitting on top of the sledge, the driver held the reins of his unsettled horses confidently in one hand, his other hand resting lightly on a crossbow. Will could see his face, maintaining a bored look, pretending to be focused on the road. His eyes, though, reflected more than enough light for Will to see he was scanning the edges of the gully, looking into every shadow on the snow, and around every stone. Underneath him, one of the sledge's skids slipped across a rock and let out a pained scrape, the stone sliding under the metal. Sweat was beading on the driver's forehead, despite the frigid night air, and the two guards that rode with him appeared to be equally hot. Will could almost feel the warmth of their bodies, but he could definitely smell their anxiety, their nervousness. Their fear.

Where am I? Why... are these guys in fur clothes? I don't get it. I mean... I didn't think... the jungle... it... can it snow? When did that happen? Shit, I'm so confused. And those guys... they... they look real. They smell real. They smell like metal...mould, and oil, and leather. Chain-mail, fur cotton underclothes, oiled weapons... leather accessories. They smell real. But... but they can't be in the jungle... the... it's just too damn humid for that kind of getup. But here they are. And the jungle is gone...everything is snowy. Cyntia... Cyntia at least could be from the jungle... she's a jaguar, or something... can see it. But... but this is somewhere else... somewhere older. It's just not possible... it doesn't make any sense. It can't be far to get back... we just ran here, after all. So maybe, maybe there's a snowy forest in the jungle. Maybe... maybe I see things a little different now. I mean, people... people talk about near death experiences changing you. I need to talk to someone... talk to Cyntia... this isn't right...

Beside him, Will felt Cyntia rise up onto her haunches. Snapping back into the moment, he focused again on the sledge. Again, he heard the hollow bump from inside the back. He just couldn't work out what it was. Slowly, the sledge drew nearer and nearer, and the horses grew more and more nervous. *Again... like a muffled cry... what is that noise anyway?* Cyntia turned her face towards Will, and his sharp ears heard her faint whisper in the cold night air.

“We must help them... free them... inside the troika, my people...”

Her words sent Will's mind reeling. Time slowed, as Will's nerves became alive and he focused on the moment. ***Prisoners must be set free. Oh god... why do they have prisoners?*** Heartbeat. ***We shall set them free, we shall save them. My... my nails... they're growing...*** Cyntia pushed her legs under her body, and like someone moving through honey, she unhurriedly leapt through the air, small clouds of snow filtering slowly down in the space she had just left. ***We hunger, and they are food. Oh no... oh no oh no oh no.*** Will felt his muscles tense, his body preparing to jump forward. ***They are flesh, they are weak. I can't do this... I don't want to hurt anybody! I can't just... kill them!*** A thin trickle of a scream escaped the lips of one of the guards, as Cyntia's long claws tore into his throat, sending up a thin sheet of blood between the severed layers of flesh and muscle. ***We are hungry. We shall eat. I don't even know these people!*** Will felt himself shoot into the air, the wind whistling past his face as he fell upon the driver of the sledge. ***Tear, rip, chew. Oh my god... oh my god...*** Will thrust his powerful arms through the chest of the now screaming driver, pushing chain-mail and fur through his body in a blow, and then tore his arms wide, ripping apart the man, sending

chunks of flesh and ribcage spinning through the air, awash in arterial blood. Red splashes soaked into the snow across the gully. *First we save them, and then we eat... I... I can't... urgh... I'm so sorry...* Heartbeat.

Time sped up, as Will buried his sharp teeth in the sundered torso of the driver. At his side, he could hear Cyntia feasting on the first man. *Where is he? There were two...* A bolt of steel tore into Will's arm, but he paid it little mind. A sharp pang of hunger stabbed into him. Raising himself, Will's teeth descended once more into the flesh of the dead driver, biting hard and pulled back, ripping out what was left of his heart and lungs in a single, gory tug of his jaws. Finally he turned to face the last man, still mounted on his horse. His fingers were fumbling with his crossbow. Will pushed down hard against the top of the sledge, felt it judder and tip under his thrust as he leapt upon the guardsman. Behind him, the horses neighed in fear and pain as the sledge tipped over from the force of his jump, but Will didn't care. Already he could feel the hole in his arm had started to heal. A hole in his new arm. The arm he thought he'd lost. Another stab of hunger as painful as the bolt had been tore through his body, as the wound started to close.

Will's leap had carried him in front of the horse. He threw his unnaturally long arms around its chest, and struck a blow. His powerful claws drove through the calves of the mounted rider, severing through the chain-mail, the leather, and slicing deep gouges into the horse underneath. The horse reared up, hurt but not mortally, and screaming, the legless guardsman slid to the snow, awash in his own steaming blood. Will pushed the man down and plunged his teeth into his throat.

Quickly, Will drank from the man's severed arteries before he bled out on the gully floor. Dragging their still steaming meat away onto the rise, Will paid little mind to the sledge. The prisoners were free, the sledge sundered open when it fell. Cyntia looked at the chaos a moment, and then satisfied that those inside would be able to break free, resumed dragging her meal away. Will saw that the prisoners were bundled together inside; they lay in a darkened corner, unconscious. Something familiar tugged at his memory, but it didn't matter; Will didn't care, his hunger had taken control of him, and there was plenty of fresh meat. Setting their victims down in a clear patch of snow, concealed by a few pine trees some way from the gully, Will and Cyntia wordlessly divvied up the remaining flesh. They set to work easing their hunger.

Travel diary, entry 5.

I came out here for a change. I've been trying to change my life for a while, now. I was an accountant, but I couldn't stand it anymore. I tossed it in. I left my wife... wife of three years. She was adorable, and perfect... but she wanted me to fit in, be the man of HER dreams. I couldn't do it anymore. I left... I left her the house, I left her the car. I just left. Well, I think things are finally changing. Cyntia (the woman who helped me) and I, were walking in the jungle, (I'm nearly better...) and we came across some villagers. They were being taken away by armed men, beaten and abused. And now Cyntia is telling me we should help them... and I can't say no. So I think I'm going to try and help. But what the hell are we going to do about soldiers armed with machine guns?

Chapter 4: Mike.

Mike slowly walked out back out of the station. Ignoring the two detectives as he went out, he stopped as one of them let out a whistle.

“*pheed*... Hey, Mike! Just a quick question, what’s your zip code pal?”

“Huh? Zip code?”

“Yeah, we thought you were crazy, but now we can see your nuts...”

“Now hang on a damn minute...”

“Geez... you’re flying low, pal.”

“Oh... oh right. Thanks.”

Damnit. Mike adjusted his wayward zip and left as quickly as he could. *God I hope she didn’t notice... great, just great. Now I look like an even bigger idiot...* Mike thrust his hands into his jeans pockets, and dug out his wallet. Shielding himself from the blowing gale, he fished around in the note section, and coming up empty, resorted to tipping out the coins. Small change tinkled into his hand. *Not even enough for a god-damned phone call. Even bloody prisoners get a phone-call!* Mike ducked under an awning in front of the police station, shivering in the squall. Even as he cowered under the meager shelter above him, winds

whipped heavy rain into his clothes. Soaking through his shirt in seconds, Mike started shivering as the thin, saturated cotton clung to his body. Rain ran down the brim of his hat, trickled down the back of his neck, flowed down along his spine and into parts beyond, all the while accompanied by the staccato of poorly suppressed shivering. *What sort of sick bastard leaves a man without a coat in this weather? And why did she have to be so hot?*

A splash of dirty rainwater sprayed across Mike, blasting his hat to the ground and taking away any semblance of dry in its wash. *Son of a bitch! I may as well just piss myself to keep warm... this is fucking unbelievable... no way to sober up... no way at all. Screw this. I'm catching a cab.* Alternating between cowering under shelter and frantically waving at passing vehicles, Mike finally managed to flag down a passing yellow and gold. *Don't think about the bill... don't think about the bill... look rich... feeling rich... hey, smile for the man, smile the smile of the man who isn't skipping out on the ride... smile the smile of the man with 50 bucks in his pocket, just for travel. How the hell did I get so broke so fast anyway? No, don't think about it... keep smiling... that's it, smile til you're all the way into the damn car... and slam goes the door. Damn... smells like wet dog in here.*

“Yo, Jack Napier... quit the grinning, you're in. Where're we headed, buddy?”

“Do you know the little hotel on...” *Yeah... you know, the hotel where I live. So you can find me and break my arms for not paying your damn flag fall...* “Scratch that, there’s a little pub I want you to take me to...”

Struggling to keep the smile on his face from becoming panic, Mike made small talk as the taxi wildly careened through the night. Outside, the wheels sent up waves in their wake, splashing down the few foolish pedestrians caught out so late at night. The heat inside the cab was oppressive, engine heat blasting from the fans, and combined with the smell of wet wool from the car-seat, and Mike’s own soggy, vomit-tainted odour, soon the car became unbearable. As the windows became dangerously opaque, Mike dared to crack open a window, not so much trying to help the car demist as to gasp the odd breath of fresh air. In the fifteen minute trip, Mike’s clothes were already starting to dry out, or had at least stopped clinging embarrassingly to his flesh. *Thank fuck... nothing worse than walking into a bar with headlights...*

“Okay pal, that’s gonna be 25 bucks.”

“Not a problem, my good man... just lemme duck inside...”

“Hey now, you wouldn’t be trying to pull something shifty, would you pal? Cos if ya don’t know, people around here are like to take offense to something like that.”

Mike caught the cab-driver reaching slowly under his dashboard. *Fuck... he's reaching for a god damned piece. Last thing I need is more ventilation.*

“Don’t worry man, I’ll be right back.”

Halfway through his sentence, Mike swung wide his door and shot out into the pub. Waving at the cab driver, smiling so hard his teeth were bent, he ran inside. Backing through the front door, Mike stopped suddenly. He’d bumped into something unyieldingly solid, and horribly familiar.

“Hey! If it isn’t our best customer! Back so soon? Rebecca isn’t available... right now. I thought you’d be back tomorrow.”

Standing behind Mike, and a good two feet taller in fact, was the bartender from the same dive pub he’d been to earlier in the night. Mike patted him friendly-like on the shoulder, and ducked into the cloak room. *Only one way I’m getting out of this... gonna have to play it smooth, real smooth...*

“So, what can I get ya today? Another rusty nail?”

“Hey Eddie, no, I’m... I’m just picking something up... left something here before...”

Frantically, Mike dug around in the coats piled in the cloak room. *Doesn't matter that no one is ever here... there's always coats just left behind... gotta... gotta be one that fits...*

“Hey! Everything okay in there, friend? Not up to anything I hope... not with the fine ladies just waiting out here... waiting for you to go home and have a shower maybe...”

“No... ugh... no... nothing shady... juh.... juh... *damnit* just grabbing my... urgh... coat.”

I've never seen such an ugly coat... flaps at the back... and what's with these damn giant pockets? Guess it's not all bad... same colour as the hat... it's warm... maybe it'll be okay. Time to strut my stuff. Mike waltzed casually out, waved a flippant farewell at Eddie the barman, and spun on his heel. Through the frosted window of the pub door, Mike saw the cab driver strolling towards him.

“Say... Eddie... don't have a back door here, do you?”

“Planning on making a clean getaway or something? Hur hur. No, friend... no back door... the fire door was it, but that's been jammed good and shut for three years now. Costs me a damn fortune to pay the safety inspectors...”

Too late... shit.

Pushing through the door, the cab driver's eyes only held daggers for Mike. Shuffling backwards again, looking uncomfortable, Mike again bumped into the bartender. *Stupid prick... why does he always have to stand so goddamned close...*

“Hey... I don't want no trouble here, friend... you know that...”

“Oh no, Eddie... no trouble... just had to get my coat... urgh, my coat... to pay this man... for my ride...”

Feeling lucky... smiling rich. No back door. Blocked front door. Fat ugly bartender holding onto my ass like a goddamned jail-wife. Pissed off cabbie's gonna slit me and dump me in an alley somewhere... no running... just smile... big smiles... fuck... nothing in this pocket... nothing here... shit... hey... hey hey! Inside pocket, feeling lucky... feeling a fifty, I reckon. Feeling very lucky. Smiling the smile of a man with 50 bucks in his pocket, just for travel.

Doing his best not to visibly sigh in front of the cabbie, Mike nonchalantly pulled out a fifty dollar note sitting in his inside pocket of his newly acquired coat.

“Sorry I don't have anything smaller... but its okay... I'm going to need a ride back to my hotel...”

All smiles, the cabbie and Mike headed back outside, waving goodnight to the nervously sweating Eddie and his ladies of negotiable affection. As the door closed behind them, Mike heard a ruckus starting inside.

“Hey... who fucking stole my coat! Some motherfucker stole my coat!”

What sort of sick bastard leaves a man without a coat in this sort of weather? A sick, desperate bastard, that sort of man.

*

The ride home had been uneventful. Mike had climbed out of the cab, gave the man the rest of the change as his tip, and had staggered up to his room. He opened his door and threw the purloined coat onto the dresser. Half mumbling, he made a vague promise to return the ugly thing when his came back. He went and had a quick shower, trying to wash the sour stink of vomit, blood, sweat and wool from his skin. *Damn I'm tired. Gotta do something about the money tomorrow...* Mike collapsed into bed, time passing him by in a hazy blur of sleep and alcohol induced dehydration.

Waking in the late afternoon, sunlight streaming through poorly shuttered blinds, Mike dreamily opened his eyes...*why'd she have to be so hot...* Sitting on his chest was a folded piece of paper. Blinking away sleep, Mike blearily read the note.

Sir, please settle your account by tomorrow noon,
or you will be required to leave the premises.

Regards,

The Management.

God damn pricks... stagger in drunk one night, and they're all over you for an excuse to leave. Still, this isn't good... I hadn't planned on paying much for this holiday... it was all part of a package. They all go and disappear. Leaving me pissing my little money away on bribes and booze, trying to find them. When I DO find them... it's gonna be a round on them. And a new coat. God damnit.

Mike shrugged off the bedclothes, and staggered over to the minibar.

Oh for fucks sake. The minibar had been gutted, even the bottled water had been removed. Inside sat another folded note, thanking him for paying promptly. Sons of bitches really know how to hit a man...hell... guess it's time to go to work. Daddy's gotta pay the bills.

*

There are only three ways for a man like me to make fast cash. Blackmail... which I ain't got a chance in hell of doing before tomorrow... flipping burgers for a day, which really ain't my style, or doing the lowest job of the low. Real, honest to god police work. Gotta talk to the desk sergeants... there's always some shitty job that the cops have a higher up breathing down their neck for... some shitty job that any man on the street could do, if he had time... pictures of vandals, names of pimps and druggies... hell, even catching litter bugs and jaywalkers. Cops don't always have time for the little jobs... not with the big ones coming wave after wave. And sometimes, sometimes there is a few bucks in it. So here we go... walking into the cop station... looking fresh... all clean cut and bright eyed. Smiles, all smiles... and there's the man of the hour... the desk sergeant... my hero.

“Yeah? What the hell do you want, wino?”

“Hey, shut your fa”

...Not cool...

“I'm new around here... I do detective work, I'm from outta town... and I'm down on my luck... so I was wondering... you know... if you could maybe, have a little... excess workload?”

“Yeah, I heard about you... came in last night, pissed and covered in blood. Nope, sorry pal, we don’t do hiring... you wanna try the burger joint down the street.”

“Maybe... maybe I’m not making myself clear. I know *you* are the guy I need to speak to. Surely you’ve got something... just something to keep me afloat, til your fine detectives find my friends and show little ol’ out of town me how it’s done...”

Behind the desk, the sergeant’s expression darkened. Looking shiftily to the left and the right, making sure no one was within earshot, he leaned conspiratorially close to Mike.

“Alright... there’s something... nothing hard... but it... it doesn’t come strictly from the up aboves, you hearin me? So this one is hush hush. Anyway, there’s a local... businesswoman... she’s having, well, a little trouble with some homeless guys. Particularly some new guy...”

“Uh huh... I’m all ears...”

“Keeps hanging out near her work... scaring off the johns, you hearin me? See, now we can’t step in, it’s not above board... but she’d like the guy gone, all the same. He moves around a bit though... or she’d probably have had someone pay him a visit already. It’s simple... we want to shoo him off... but we need to find him. So here’s how this goes... you stake him out... you’re shady enough to

fit right in, I'd reckon... so you stake it out... and all you gotta do is give us a call when you see him. You'll get paid... you pay me a commission for setting you on the right path... and she gets what she wants. Simple right?"

"Nothing easier... one question... you got a dollar? I'm gonna need it for the call..."

*

Oh fuck... what the hell have I done? I can't believe I am this fucking stupid... it's all gone to shit, and now there's no one to blame but me. Mike ran down the road, chasing a speeding car already screaming out of sight. In one hand, he held 500 dollars, and in the other he held a silver chain. Erik... you stupid bastard... what the hell have you gotten into? How the hell was I supposed to know it was you! I just saw some homeless guy... squatting among the boxes... checking out the johns and girly girls... bearded hobo, homeless drifter... didn't look a damn thing like you man. I made the call... the cops came... looked like cops... wearing the blue anyway. Mike slowed his pace to a jog, breathless in the cold night air. They gave me the money on the spot... shady as all getout, but then this whole thing was shady...then they ran at you... beat you down... started dragging you off into a car... I was running, screaming... it was then I twigged, you know... they were laughing at me... those fuckers... but I was too far away... and then your hat came off... and the chain... your chain... fell off your neck... onto the floor. I remember seeing it before. You're checking out the same damn shady guys I've been trying to get a lead on all this time... and then bam, in the

boot you go, screech of tires... and they're away. Fucking hell... I'm the stupidest motherfucker on this god damned planet... all for 500 bucks... to pay the damn bills, while I looked for you. What do you know? Why'd they get you... why couldn't you come to me? Mike slowed to a walking pace. There was no need to run after the car now... there was no need to run at all. *Time to go back to the hotel, and plan. Only one 'businesswoman' in town with the clout to have crooked cops... the same woman who was running Eddie's bar into the ground. The same woman who had Mike's friends... and this time, he'd seen it with his own eyes. Only one place to go now. Looks like I've got a date.*

Mentok, the MindTAKER! You see that? That's not asking. That's TAKING the mind.

I've had a breakthrough. I think I found Erik! That's the good news. Great news. Wonderful news. Except I accidentally, and I can't stress this enough, accidentally may have kinda possibly helped get him abducted by terrorists or guerilla militiamen. I know he can hold a bit of a grudge, so it's going on record right here, man, I didn't know it was you, and if I had known, I PROBABLY wouldn't have done what I did. Aw, fuck it, now I've got to try and get him back.

Chapter 5: Jonathon.

“So anyway, man, its not so bad... just try speaking again now...”

“Gah, what the hell did you do to my face... this still stings a little... thanks though...”

“Anytime man... hold still, we’ll patch you up.”

As soon as the Interlopers had discovered Jonathon’s difficulty, they had set about solving the problem. Despite his frantic waving and worried expression, they had assured him everything would be okay and lay him down in some shade. Trigga had come along and framed Jonathon’s face in her hands, while Burner and Jet had applied some sort of anesthetic. Every now and then Jonathon had felt a tug, as the implanted technology in his face was adjusted. Burner kept adjusting some now exposed wiring. After several long minutes of adjustments, they’d finally made progress.

“Now don’t rush, man, yeah? This is a hack job... never done one of these before... it’ll stop Vector prohibitin’ your speech, maybe even let you control the implant a bit, but maybe it just might even stop the whole thing workin’, right? Don’t force it, lets see how badly they’ve messed you up... okay... that’s your face all back together...”

*

I never realized quite how dexterous the human hand and mind can be. As Jonathon sat amongst the nomadic people living outside AlphaPrime, he found himself marveling at their raw talent. These guys are sitting out in the middle of the desert... dust storms blowing crap all over the place, and there they are using ten thousand year old solder guns and rusty bits of scrap metal, god knows what else... making not only simple stuff, but hydraulics and electronics too.

He carefully drew his fingers over the neat stitches that had been made behind his ear, wincing slightly at the pain, but glad that the Interlopers had been skilled enough to help him. Already, Jonathon had developed something of an awareness of his implant. Where before it had been a nagging sensation, he could now feel when it was working, a staccato white noise underlying translated words the people around him used in conversation. Jonathon let his attention trail over the Interlopers, listening to the hubbub. *No books... no factories... not a robot in sight. Just two guys holding a small vat of liquid metal, half the village out combing scrap heaps, pulling out useful material and lugging it back miles and miles, and everyone else tinkering or standing guard.*

“Grub’s up, oldtimer. Today you get to choose between dirt, and snake.”

“Urgh... dirt? You’re pulling my leg right?”

“Dirt’s gots minerals... but if ya wantin snake, s’fine... most people are a little, yaknow, squeamish. Snakes eatin people’an’all, ya know. Big bastards though, plenty of meat... no poison either... just... people-bits.”

“Erm... snakes good.”

“No glitches? What flavour you want? You want head-meat?”

“Come again?”

“I said, do you want the head, or are you happy just to eat snake butt. Snake only comes in two flavours. Head an’ butt. Me, I prefer the head end.”

“You know what... I’m... I’m not really all that hungry. Maybe if you guys... have leftovers or something, maybe I’ll take a bit of tail... but... yeah, no dramas right?”

*

Jonathon watched the Interlopers gather for meal time with surprising gusto. Scavengers trickled into the shanty town almost simultaneously. *My god... never seen anyone run to eat dirt before, but look at em... just tossing tools down, the second that rusty old cowbell got whacked. Even the ones out looking for junk in the desert, here they are right on time... like they were watching the clock or something. Can’t be that bloody good... it’s frigging dirt. And snake... with dead*

human flesh in its bowels. Hardly an appetising meal. Running to the centre of the village, the Interlopers starting whooping and flinging their arms into the air. *Geez, you'd think they never saw each other or something.*

“Hey Burner, what’s with all the hoohaa man... don’t you guys eat much or something?”

“Oldtimer, you’re crazy... this... this is a gathering. We’re not exactly coming together regular, yeah? This is the first time in 5... 6 months... maybe more... this is the first time some people have seen their family in maybe twice as long.”

“What... but... weren’t they just out scavenging? What stops them coming back...”

“Not bright for an oldtimer... not bright. Notice a lot of food around here? Notice it not. There isn’t. We are feasting on dirt today... but there’s not even much of that going around... so normally it’s snake... maybe. Some people eat worse... some people even... nah, no glitches, not your problem.”

“...eat other people? That’s what you were going to say... wasn’t it...”

“What? Daft oldtimer... no one eats people! Guess you’re gonna keep asking...got yourself a burning desire to know... hmph. Some people... they give it up. Give it all up. Just hand themselves in... walk right up to AlphaPrime...

right up to the shield. Start crying, begging, calling for Vector to save them. To feed them. The guards come... sticks out man, yeah? The crying stops... and they go away. Sometimes it happens that way, anyway.”

“Okay... so you stay apart... survival... I get it. Spread out the demand on the food source, never outstrip the supply... but... what’s today’s get together for then?”

“You. We’re risking it all... me an’ Jet an’ Trigga called a meeting... called back the scavengers... called the Interlopers home. Oldtimers haven’t exactly been blowing out of AlphaPrime, and when one comes, we’ve all gotta learn from you... gotta learn your tricks... or it’s too late, you’re gone, and that’s something lost, man. We’ve never had much to begin with, so losing it isn’t a choice we make lightly. It’s dangerous man... gettin together is askin for trouble... Alpha’s slavers come, we’re cooked... can’t fight jetpacks and tanks, not with sticks and sand, even the ordnance only drops the little people... get a big one come in, we’re in trouble. But you need to see her, man...”

“Her?”

“The elder, man... she’s the oldest. She knows stuff... knows you. So old... she probably knows Vector.”

*

Sitting down in a loose circle on the ground, the Interlopers chatted and hugged and caught up as the food was brought in. A massive skewered snake, hauled in by three people, was dumped without much ceremony onto the ground. A few people moved towards it, pulling out concealed knives and other implements, and began to cut off portions. Most of the Interlopers didn't move however. *Guess they're all waiting for the dirt... may as well start shoving your hands into the sand now, guys... dirt is dirt. Aint gonna taste any better if you sit on it...* Another two Interlopers were slowly dragging a metal machine into the circle. Others quickly stood to help them drag it in, while still more gathered around eagerly. *Oh look... not just dirt...looks like they keep it in a dishwasher too. Yeah, go go enzyme-filled dishwashing powder... urgh... I'd have thought real dirt would be better for you than that.*

The door of the machine was opened, and Interlopers began to move almost solemnly towards the opening. Each reached inside and took a handful of what appeared to be rainbow-coloured sand, and then carefully cradling their portion, moved back into their family groups to eat. Crunching down on the grains seemed to be not only be pleasurable, but tasty too. Jonathon watched amazed as the Interlopers around him savored their meal.

“Hey Burner, what's with the grit? Laced with drugs or something?”

“Drugs... what the hell kind of place did you come from, oldtimer? It's a foodmach... one of Vector's... stolen right out of AlphaPrime... you were there... you musta tried the food...”

“Well... I had a sandwich...”

“And it tasted great, right? Well... it came from something like this. This makes the dirt inside AlphaPrime, they’re all hooked up to so many widgets and gizmos that the foodmachs... they know what the insiders want to eat. Out here, we aren’t so lucky... so we get dirt instead. The machine can’t read us... but it knows what we need to eat, and it knows it has to taste good, not bad, or no one would eat it.”

“So... the dirt... its not, like, the sand here... it’s... food? Real food? Just... powdered?”

“Sand? Sand isn’t the dirt... no wonder you lookin confused. Who’d take snake... when they could have the dirt? Try some... there’s enough for you to try. But once this is gone, it’ll be days before it makes any more. So try some now, before it all goes to Jet, man. That fat man... he’d eat the machine if we’d let him, right?”

Jonathon moved over to the foodmach, and joined the queue. *God damn... I’d kill for another sandwich...a nice turkey...* With a whirring noise, the foodmach suddenly spat out something that looked suspiciously like a sandwich. Jonathon quickly grabbed it up and walked away from the now-staring crowd. *Guess this implant thing can talk to the machine... or something...who knows?*

Catching a surprised look from Burner, Jonathon smiled and tapped his ear, then walked off to sit in the shade away from the group.

Surreptitiously watching the Interlopers while he ate, Jonathon began to notice that there were cliques forming around him. On one hand, there were family groups, obviously happy to sit together, to catch up. They were just glad for what they had, a chance to get-together. And then, closely following Jonathon, were another group. Mostly the younger ones, Jet, Burner, Trigga and a few others that weren't on guard duty or eating with family. These seemed to be the loners, without a family group. *The fighters of the village, maybe?* Each of the men and women around Jonathon were scarred, veterans of encounters in the wild, and maybe even encounters with AlphaPrime's guards themselves. *These are the ones that have lost something... family... friends... so all they've got is each other. These are the ones who are angry... these are the ones who want to fight back. And here they are... hanging around me...*

*

Jonathon had been quietly talking to Jet about his weapon, when a hand had politely tapped him on the back. Turning around, a little girl beckoned to him to follow. Rising, he followed her a short distance from the crowd. Jonathon found a woman of about 40 years waiting patiently in the shade. *Aging, maybe, but hardly an 'elder'.* Flanking him, Burner and Trigga had come along, leaving Jet behind to eye the rainbow dirt machine askance. Wandering a small way from the main body of people, the elder had beckoned them all to sit. Taking a closer

look at her, Jonathon revised his age estimate up a few years. Under her chin, and around her eyes, he noticed a very fine network of wrinkles, almost invisible in the bright sunlight, but here in the slightly shaded area they could be seen tracing a map of age across her otherwise still sprightly face.

“Thank you Althea, you can go. Hello, Jonathon...”

“Wow... Burner said you knew me... I didn't think he meant literally...”

“He didn't. And I don't. They just mentioned you had a name, and I thought it might be a little more polite than Oldtimer, as the other Interlopers will no doubt call you until the day you leave us.”

“Ahh... fair enough. I heard... some people talking before... they... they said something about learning from me. But... but I don't know what... what I can teach you. You guys really already seem to know so much... I was watching, before... they are all so amazing...”

“Jonathon, how old do you think I am?”

“Uhm... I'm not sure... I... I'd hate to offend you. 40 maybe?”

“You err on the side of caution... I appreciate that. Jonathon, I am 432 years old. No, don't make that face. I am one of the last Oldtimers... I came from your future, a time when nanotechnology and genetic redevelopment in the womb

had significantly extended the human lifespan. I found an amber drop, just like you. I became trapped here, just like you. And for the longest time, I was content to just stay in AlphaPrime... ahh, for the longest time..."

"So you finally escaped?"

"I hadn't been attempting to. It took me many years before I even gained an inkling of how Vector controls the populace... and once I learned, it was many more before I had the courage to flee."

"It seems they've got media control down to a pretty fine art, with all that eartech and speaktech crap. Hear no evil, say no evil, and it doesn't matter what you see."

"Quiet right, quite right... Vector controls the people through the gifting, and through information privilege. The gifting though... it didn't seem unusual to you?"

"Well... I wasn't actually there for one... kinda ran away a little early there. I did think the technology in there was a little backwards... the only things really advanced were the headgear and the shield... everything else could have come from maybe a few hundred years from my past onwards, even."

"Again... that is something close to the truth. In fact, the gifts appear to span various major trends that my people had noted historically, and included one

or two articles I found to be contemporary for my time. My guess is that the gifts represent innovations in consumer controls over a wide range of years.”

“This all sounds good... but... and I hate to pin this on you... but you’re the oldest person here, and I need answers. I’m looking... to get home. I’m looking...”

“...for your friends. Yes, I understand. Burner told me something of your situation. You asked what you can bring to the Interlopers... you may not have noticed this, but in part due to my age, I am quite frail. I fill a role here... I am something of a spiritual leader. I ensure the survival of this group of humanity, in the face of adversity. But, we are missing something. We are missing any real drive... much like the people of AlphaPrime, we are in entropy... we live to survive, and by surviving we only live. What we need is an outside influence... someone like you.”

“Me? What the hell can I offer?”

“Your nature... I think there is something you can offer... we need someone strong, someone who can stand up to Vector.”

“But me? What do you expect me to do? I can’t fight... I... I’ve never been in a fight in my life.”

“There isn’t anyone else, Jonathon. We are the last of the free peoples of this place, and without a leader we shall fall.”

“There were others, right? Why the hell am I the only one who can do this?”

“Those who came before you fought to survive... tribesmen, farmers, their only true enemy was nature. There is no nature now, nothing natural exists, only what Vector deems acceptable. You are unique to us, the first from your time. Those who came after did not fight at all, peaceful, erudite and infinitely patient, they merely observed and taught, without passion. Yet, your people have a singular heritage, standing on the cusp of enlightenment, while teetering over the precipice of utter destruction. You have a balance. More, I will not say. You will lead the Interlopers... you will lead them to face Vector. To find out the truth, to free those inside AlphaPrime, and to find your way home. There is simply no other way.”

“But... but why? They’re happy, right? The people inside?”

“And here is the crux and the truth of it. Vector doesn’t only control those inside... Vector controls us all. They come, and they take... look around you... we are so few. They take people from us in the night... no matter the guards we post, no matter how far and fast we move... they find us, and take them away. Young, old... no one is safe. And we don’t even know why. Is that not enough of a reason to fight? You say you want to return home... you want to find your

friends, whether they are here, in this time, or back where you came from... and the only person who knows is Vector.”

She’s nuts! I can’t do something like this... I’m not a soldier. Fuck her and her stupid idea... what does she expect me to do? I can’t lead these people in some kind of revolt...

“I guess...I don’t know... I... I don’t think I can help you.”

*

A piercing shriek woke Jonathon that night. Blearily opening his eyes, he staggered outside his makeshift bed. He could see fearful faces, people milling around. Suddenly, Trigga pushed past the crowd and ran towards him.

“Have you seen her? Have you seen her!”

“Seen who? What’s happened? What’s going on?”

Pushing him down in frustration, Trigga screamed again and started ransacking another shanty. Confused, Jonathon looked around for anyone else he knew, finally catching sight of Burner.

“Why is Trigga doing that? Is she nuts?”

“Naw man... it’s not her fault...it’s her sister...Althea, she’s gone... they took her... Vector... she’s gone.”

Overhead, the sound of engines could be heard.

“Run! They’ve found us again! We’ve got to move!”

Burner grabbed hold of Jonathon’s arm, and dragged him over to his vehicle, as the sky above them lit up with weapons fire. The ground around them scorched to glass, and moonlight reflected eerie hues across the faces of those caught in the blasts.

*

A few hours later, Burner’s crew returned, but it was too late. The village was destroyed. The survivors scattered in all directions rather than face up to the assault of Vector’s soldiers, and those who fled had not returned. Incredulous, Jonathon sat in the front passenger seat of Burner’s vehicle, trying to absorb everything that had happened. Behind him, he could still hear Trigga screaming as Jet tried to comfort her, as the vehicle drove off aimlessly into the night.

“Now you see, man, right? See why we can’t do nuthin’ but run?”

“Yeah... I’m beginning to get an idea why you run.”

“It’s over man, we’ve done. Cooked. Nuthin’ doin. May as well go to the wall, start beggin for in. Not many made it away dis time, not many at all man.”

“No... no, I don’t think so...”

These people... they know how to survive, they know how to flee... but they don’t know how to resist. They’ve spent so long giving in, its just what they do... the idea of actually standing up for themselves is alien, doesn’t even occur to them...

Jonathon looked over his shoulder again at Trigga, then at Jet; both carried their firearms.

She was right... there really isn’t any other way. These people are all but gone, and no one else can help them. It’s down to me... finally it’s down to me...there just isn’t anyone else.

“We’ll go under the wall... maybe if we’re quick we can get everyone back. You with me?”

“Man... I heard the elder’s last words, she wanted this. Besides, what other choice do we have? Run and hide again?”

Burner looked him in the eye, but since the attack that night the confident mask he wore had slipped away. Jonathon could only see fear. *I wonder if my face looks like his... but there's no other way... not now...*

*

Burner, Jet, Trigga and Jonathon had driven to within a mile of the city, and had walked the rest of the way, to try and avoid possible detection. Walking around the shield had not provided any entrance, and Burner had urged Jonathon to leave, to reconsider his approach. It was then that Jonathon caught an unusual glint of metal not too far from the shield wall. Going over to investigate, he found a concealed entrance, an impressively heavy metal door that had been left open. *Must be how the soldiers go in and out... well, if it works for them, it'll be fine for us too. As long as we can avoid them.* Jonathon cautiously explored the gloom before beckoning the others to join him. The assault on AlphaPrime had begun.

November 8th

I'd like to state, for the record, that moving through jungle sucks balls. I've met up with some locals... seems this whole place is up shit creek. The guys I'm with now were just farmers, poor people who keep getting sacked for resources, and now they've scraped together some guns. Seems the other guys are some new regime, trying to steal power... god damn this place is nuts. They want me to help them, these farmers, get into the camp and screw things up. I haven't decided what to do yet. One thing is certain though, I can't stay here... no one has a radio even, so I can't call for help or anything.

Thought for the day: Don't fuck with farmers, they kill things for a living.

Chapter 5: Erik.

“Tho born wealthy of coin and physique...He will not avail...”

Damn... that thing is going to be haunting me forever. I just can't figure it out. Urgh... what's happened now? Did I black out again? Okay... lets open the eyes... oohh... bright. Not a dwarf or fairy in sight though, things are looking up. Where am... hang on... I... I'm in like... wow, this place is pretty swanky. Silk sheets... big bed... yeah... yeah I like this place. I wonder if Ming came along... I guess I could set up a guest bed for him or something...

Erik found himself comfortably propped up on exquisitely soft silken pillows, in a bedroom that he could only describe as exceptionally opulent. Stained glass windows allowed multi-hued sunlight to play across intricately patterned carpets lain in the room, while a magnificently detailed wooden table in the distant corner of the room carried a mountain of flora. The flowers naturally included the vermillion and rainbow flower as a centerpiece to the arrangement, tastefully surrounded in bouquets arranged by colour and petal design. In all, Erik had never been in such a lavish room before, and he was impressed. Admittedly somewhat disappointed that there were no harem girls, or any sign of servants Erik found he was content to bask in the gently diffused afternoon sunlight, and assess the situation.

Okay... so... something happened... and here I am. Guards? I remember something like that... well, either jail cells have been given a Martha Stewart touch, or I'm not under arrest. And what did I do wrong in the first place? ...still

kinda fuzzy. So I was beaten... and carried here. Oh, and look, there's Ming. He's even got a sofa all to himself... cute. So I can't be under arrest... people under arrest aren't usually left with severed limbs, right? Has something changed? Am I into some new and fantastic delusion where I don't have to scrabble around in the wilds to survive, and instead get to be in charge? I could learn to like that. Maybe I'll even get Ming one of those shields... he can ride around like a village chief... I'll change his name... Vitalstatistix! That fat chief from Asterix... it suits him... he looks kind of Gaulish. Ghoulish? This isn't right... how can I keep imagining things like this... it's just so vivid... something can't be right...

Without warning, a burly hand thrust open the door to the bedchamber, and several heavysset guardsmen sauntered in. The scowls on their faces and generally hostile body language helped convince Erik that perhaps things were not quite as different as he had first thought. Peremptorily frog-marched out of the comfortable chamber, halberds poking him in the back, Erik made a quick and successful swipe for Ming before being prodded out into the now-overpowering sunlight. Marched down a flight of steps and into a small grassy courtyard, Erik found himself face to face with the most comfortable lounge he had ever seen. On one side of the lounge lay a table set out lavishly with fruits and cheeses, and kneeling beside it was a servant, submissively keeping his head down but watching warily from under veiled lashes.

“Ohh... I get it... it's Monty Python... I'm going to sit down... you'll try and make me comfortable, Spanish Inquisition style... and then you're going to bring me tea...”

“Kneel, fool, before we chop you down to size. The Queen waits for no one, and you shall show respect.”

Forced onto his knees a few metres from the lounge, several sharp implements held uncomfortably close to his face, Erik carefully let his eyes wander the courtyard. He managed to catch sight of a concealed doorway slipping open underneath the staircase, opened by a delicate, womanly hand. Stately in manner and demeanor, by the way she moved it seemed the Queen had arrived. Elegantly walking towards the lounge, unannounced by any fanfare or greeting, Erik felt himself nonetheless cowed by her presence. Lowering his gaze, Erik pondered his fate. *It's not like I even know what I did wrong...* A gentle rustle indicated the Queen had taken her seat, and after a momentary pause, she quietly cleared her throat.

“I am given to understand that you came from beyond Dyfed’s miasma...”

“Ye...”

Erik’s reply was cut off by the uncomfortable bite of steel, cutting ever so slightly into the skin of his throat.

“No, he may speak. I may learn something from him. Do continue, I’d be fascinated to hear how you found your way here, to my kingdom, and to Fionn Gráinne Peak in particular.”

“I’m sorry. Yes, your Majesty... I... in my own place, I... I became separated from my friends, and in searching for them and instead, I found the mists. I entered, I was told to, and...”

“Told to? Pray continue.”

“... so I entered... and found myself here, in this place. It is very different from my home... time seems warped here... and the animals, and people... very different. Things here seem like myths and folklore from home...”

“I am not interested so much in your home, as I am in your intent here.”

“I’m so sorry... I’m just here, looking for my friends. I haven’t had much luck finding them so far. So I’ve just been trying to survive, catching fish... just until I can find my friends here, or even find my way back through the mists... sorry, the miasma.”

“Back through the miasma? Impossible nonsense. And what of the arm? A prior companion, mayhap?”

“I am unsure, your Majesty... we, a friend and I, we found the arm... in the wreckage. I took it with me... in case it does belong to one of my friends... uhm... where I come from, we can use things like that to...”

“Yes, yes, necromancy, always tricks with you outsiders... sorcery and magic. How very humdrum. So tell me, what are you?”

“Pardon me, your Majesty?”

“I shall not repeat myself, answer my question.”

“I... I’m not anything really. I’m just... I haven’t really got a job or anything right now, I guess I was about to start looking.”

“I don’t care about your means of living, I mean explicitly what is it that makes you exceptional? What special gift do you bring in through the miasma? In our history, whenever an outsider has come through, they have carried with them a distinctive mark. These few have had powers that none here can understand, and all have become heroes of legend. Like an augury, their arrival inevitably leads to social upheaval and chaos... although the commoners tell the stories differently. So how do you fare in such an illustrious group?”

“Powers? Like, magic or something? I’m... I’m just me... I’m sorry to disappoint you. I maybe know some science that might be of use...”

“A scholar? Hardly the heroic archetype history has led me to expect. Surely there is something inimitable about you... or are you truly as boring in your world as you are in mine? You do bear the mark, after all.”

“What? My... my cross? That’s just... a necklace.”

“So you aren’t a noble champion? Nor a powerful conjurer? Pray tell me, have you not slain evil beasts? Come now, what acts have you done?”

“Sorry. Hmm. I kind of slew a dragon. Although to be honest, it was more a death by misadventure. So far, I haven’t really done too much in the way of valiant deeds... things just don’t work like that where I’m from. I’m... I’m pretty handy with a bow though... and I can ride horseback... and I can use a sword, too. I’m fairly good outdoors...”

“No more. History has told us that those from outside will always be powerful, mighty. Yet, the miasma has brought unto my kingdom someone who is perhaps barely qualified to be a guardsman. Well, guardsman, I cannot have you living like a Daoine-Sidhe in my countryside, slaying and hunting as you choose. You shall earn your keep here, until I see reason for that to change. Take him to the guards’ quarters... see he is equipped and trained. Whether gifted with the art, or knowledgeable of darker abilities, we will no doubt find the answer.”

“Sorry to interrupt, your Majesty, but there was one more thing...”

Erik hesitated, about to ask the Queen about the strange dwarf and his unusual prophecy, when something caught his eye. The manservant of the Queen had discreetly waved at him, from behind the Queen. Pausing mid sentence, Erik looked closely at the figure for the first time... and recognition lit his face. It

wasn't someone kneeling, but rather it was a dwarf. Indeed, not just any dwarf, but the one who had first met him in the miasma. The manservant slowly and deliberately winked at him. *Why that little bugger... he's been playing with me all along... somehow he knew I'd end up here, eventually...*

“What is it? You are now wasting my time... choose your next words carefully, for they could very well be your last.”

The cold bite in the tone of the Queen gave Erik pause. On one hand, he could reveal the strange prophecy the dwarf had greeted him with, and hopefully he would somehow be free to leave. The demeanor of the Queen however, suggested otherwise, and Erik began to picture himself instead being sliced into by the very guards standing behind him. *I need more information... I can keep that stupid little man's secret for now... after all... might be my neck I'm saving...*

“Your Majesty, I look forward to helping however I can, but if it is not too much trouble, would I be able to join with a company that roams the countryside? It may be that I'm skilled enough to hold my own... and I would like to still be able to look for my friends, if they have somehow found their way here... I'd hate for them to... uhh... somehow avoid meeting you.”

“Perhaps... perhaps you could be useful. After all, it is very rare that strangers come to our land... and they are known to you. It shall be. Attach him to one of the hunting parties... he seems to think highly enough of himself to join them. We are done here.”

As he was again frog-marched from the courtyard, Ming in tow, Erik tried to turn and catch a glimpse of the dwarf. He saw him, feeding fruit to the Queen as she lay on her lounge. Obviously enjoying the sunlight, the Queen lay back, eyes closed and supine. Struggling to keep watching, the dwarf still refused to meet his eye. But, as he rounded the corner, Erik saw something that chilled his heart. As the dwarf placed each piece of fruit on the lips of the Queen, he shuddered. *Jesus! He's shaking, he looks so afraid. No, more than afraid... he's petrified... he seems too scared to even touch her flesh... oh man, I wish I knew what was going on here...*

Day 6.

Things are looking up. I've found my way into some local militia, apparently. They listened to my story with genuine concern, and have offered to help me find my friends. I'm heading out with them today, I think, going out by jeep, to see if we can find them. And in the meantime, they've told me that if they find anyone else wandering around, or anyone finds their way here, they'll hang onto them. I asked about a radio, or telephone, anything like that, but they've said I'm too far out, and the radio is for military use only. I don't think they want to radio in that a plane crashed next to them and they didn't know, I guess. I'm sure that if I can't find anything soon, they'll take me into town so I can keep looking there.

Chapter 5: Will.

*Why don't I feel any remorse? **They were had captives**, Cyntia told us as **much**. Cyntia... licking the blood off her hands... hands... when did she change? When did I change? It must have been... after. My god, look at them. Does anyone deserve... that? I'm so sorry. Their bones are lying at my feet, and I did that. I took them away... and it wasn't even hard. It was so callous. Their screams, their flailing... remorseless, we tore them apart anyway. Why didn't I feel anything for them... am I so brutal? No, that isn't me. I didn't want to hurt anyone! It must be something to do with the change... with the beast. I need answers... she has them... but... I can't just go over there and ask ... I've just ripped apart two people... I just can't demand anything of her.*

Naked, and very conscious of his nakedness, Will quietly walked away into the snowy woods, shivering slightly. Steam was pouring off his exposed skin; residual heat from his bestial shape. Without fur, he couldn't keep that body-heat. *Look at her... she was... so old before. Now... now she's... she's barely in her thirties. The grey is nearly all gone from her hair... her wrinkles... they're very faint. And her eyes... they're gleaming now... she's sated... I wonder... do my eyes do the same? I can't be here right now.* He'd seen a river not too far from his violent encounter, and right now was as interested in cleaning the blood from his body as he was in seeing what he looked like. After Cyntia and Will had finished their meal, they had slept. Will had awoken to see Cyntia gathering clothing and weapons from the guardsmen. He'd asked what had happened to the prisoners, but she'd only yawned and gestured vaguely towards the east. After that, there had

been an awkward silence hanging between them both. A silence that was now broken by the rustling of branches as Will pushed away from the impromptu camp of the night before. Picking a careful path through the woods, conscious of just how frail his bare skin was when exposed to the icy bark and twigs, Will made his way to the river. Kneeling in the cold, sluggish water of the river, Will began to scrub errant blood from his hands and arms. The icy water brought goose bumps to his flesh, and Will watched with some fascination as the sparse hairs on his arms stood on end to capture the warmth of his body. Arms that had, only the night before, been covered in thick, coarse fur. Arms rippled with unnatural muscle definition. Thinking brought flashes of painful memories. Gruesome images of gore, and violence. Echoing cries of screams punctuated by tearing noises and growls. The sensation of powerful claws pushing against softly yielding flesh.

Gotta snap out of it. Can't keep this up. Can't keep remembering... not the details. Remember the horror... remember the pain... don't forget it. But forget the details... those horrible details... shit, gotta stop. Scrub your hands... scrub them... wash the blood off. Can't be seen like this... bad enough I'm naked... can't be seen covered in blood. Seen by whom? The guys? I don't even know where I am anymore... this isn't a jungle... it's an arctic forest. Filled with soldiers... a forest out of place in time. Are the guys here? Is that why I couldn't find them before... keep scrubbing, nearly all the blood is gone. My god... look at that... my eyes... the blue...they've changed. They don't look right... oh my god... they're slitted... just slightly, but I can see it. I... no way can I pass this off... I'll need to find glasses or something... they're so... different. No way I can pass any

of this off... can't be seen like this... naked... caked in dried blood... I look like a... a cannibal. I... am...I ate those people... but, but it wasn't me... was it? It was it. It was the something else...

*

Will returned from the stream and sat down on the ground next to Cyntia. Embarrassed as much at Cyntia's indifference to her nakedness as he was by his own consciousness of it, he tried to cover himself. Acknowledging him with a smile, Cyntia appeared to be waiting. She appeared to be expecting questions, although perhaps not the question that was on Will's lips.

"What kind of animal are you? A... after you change? It looks... familiar."

"I have aspects of a jaguar. You've heard of them? They are a normally marked... but I am something of a rarity, even among rarities. It's called melanism... so I appear dark, and I take on traits of a similar creature... a black panther. They are a beast native to my home land... and when the change comes, that is the change I make, always."

"And me? What... what do I look like? What animal am I? I couldn't... I couldn't tell."

"I do not know. You are not something native to my home... perhaps it is something from your land? You are fast, and sleek, and strong... but neither

feline, nor reptile. You are maybe not even an animal that exists, in your world or mine... maybe you are a memory. The beast... it is something from your soul, from your spirit. It may be something from your land, long forgotten.”

“What... are we?”

“We are... this word I found long ago, and I do not know if it means anything anymore. We are Therianthropes. It is a word told to me by another of our kind... an older one. One of another land, far from here. A long story... best saved when we are away from here.”

“Where is here? How can it snow here?”

“I do not know where here is... I only know where we can enter this place. It is... disconnected, somehow. Something separate from my jungles outside... few can even see the place to enter, fewer still to leave. But come... we must make haste...”

“I can’t come back... not now. I need to get away... is that safe? For me to go away for a while?”

“Safe is a relative term. You are safe. Others can be safe in your company, if you wish it. But safety for all? No. Especially not here. You leave death and pain in your wake, just as for a time I did. For a time we all did. But you need

time to think... you will be safe, for a while, even here. There is little involuntary in your change... there is, perhaps, only a loss of inhibition.”

“Don’t.... don’t come looking for me. I... I’m going... to need time. Th... thank you... I think. For everything. But... I have to go... I think I know my way... back out of the woods... back to the jungle. I’ll... I’ll find you.”

“Take care... and do not stay away too long... I can’t answer all of your questions... but I can help you... if you’ll let me...”

Cyntia reached out a hand to rest on Will’s shoulder, but before she could touch him he flinched away. Without saying another word, Will grabbed some of the less soiled clothes from the pile of recovered items Cyntia had made, and plunged into the snowy woods. He was heading east.

*

Less than a half day’s journey... less than half a day, and Will stumbled onto a village. Cautious, unsure as to how well he had divested himself from the blood and smell of his previous night’s conflict, Will carefully approached the tall wooden outer wall. Peering through the wall, Will could only stare in amazement. To his surprise, he found himself looking not at a village of South Americans, but rather a village of Europeans... or so he’d guess. Some were armed with swords and mauls, nearly all the males were wearing pants and jerkins of fur and leather and the women wore thickly padded ankle length dresses. A smith could be heard

hammering away at metal in some unseen workshop, and the smoke from his forge barely cleared the thatched roofs of the huts inside.

Well... there goes the idea of asking these guys for a phone. Still... I should go in...

Will made his way to the open front gate; hesitating slightly, he entered. Almost immediately, he felt under scrutiny. Smiling and waving at the people he met, he tried to act casual. Each stared at anywhere but him in turn. While no one made any openly hostile movements, it became clear to Will that he was far from welcome, and far from unnoticed. Walking into the centre of the village, he found no one who would meet his gaze. Finally a little girl walked out from behind her mother's skirts; uncertain at first, more curious than afraid. Cocking her head to the left, she peered at him for a long moment, considering. And then began to smile. An older woman said something stern to the girl, something Will didn't quite catch, and the girl's eyes clung to him defiantly. Will stood there for a moment, caught in the glare of the older woman.

"Uhm... hi... look... uhm... I don't know who you think I am... but I'm beginning to have an idea why you're all looking at me funny... it's the outfit isn't it? Not too bright... damn... I... this isn't mine, you see. I... I took it. I stole it... there were soldiers... they had some people... and I... I kinda... well, I didn't... I helped the people to get away.... So ... but, well, I was... I was naked... oh god... I'd... well, I'd left my clothes behind. So... I needed something to wear... and I took... this. I'm sorry..."

A middle aged man approached, cautiously walking around Will, and the crowd stepped back to give him room. He cleared his throat, and then in slow, careful English he spoke.

“It was you? Then you must sit... sit and share repast. Honeyed mead and suckling pig, roasting even now. Our wyrd is entwined, it would seem... we have much to discuss, stranger. And I think Andrea will demand it, if nothing else.”

Will had kept his eyes downcast while he spoke, afraid of showing the villagers even more to fear. Hearing this welcome, however, he looked up to find himself face to face with the little girl’s father. He smiled, gesturing to his daughter still clinging tightly. At his side, the little girl who had first welcomed him stood beaming.

*

The people that Will had helped free were from a nearby village, he learnt. They had been taken in the dead of night from their homes, and no one knew why. At least, no one had told Will why. Some of them had family in this village, and they had sent word of their abduction, as well as of their inexplicable escape. The story had arrived just hours ahead of Will’s appearance, and even the vague details he had supplied were enough to convince those he spoke to that he had helped liberate their neighbours.

Will had unintentionally found himself settling in to the village. So far, he had stayed a week, far longer than he needed to stay to ask questions, but he still felt he needed time. It had become rapidly apparent that the people of the village not only had no idea about who he was looking for, but indeed of what he was talking about. Questions about airplanes and mobile phones raised bemused glances, and launching into descriptions left him greeted with howls of laughter, and on more than one occasion a friendly jab in the stomach. More than a few of the villagers spoke English, and they happily translated for those who didn't.

The little girl, Andrea, had spent much of her time following Will around, introducing him to the villagers and village life. Almost happy, content, Will pushed the beast from his mind... but the loss of his friends still weighed heavily. Will had been comfortable with his surroundings for the first time since the crash, and was reluctant to move on, but he was already worried he had waited too long, and he needed to start looking for his friends again.

*

Will awoke to the sound of screaming. At first he thought it was just a memory, a flashback, from so much trauma in his recent past. Fading echoes; Will thought it was his just mind playing tricks. The splintering of wood and roar of flames that engulfed his floor convinced him otherwise. Springing to his feet, Will dashed outside and was greeted by chaos. Outside, everywhere there was slaughter, villagers fleeing every which way as mounted men rode them down into the ground, trampled them under their horses, hacked at them with swords and

burned them with torches. A large group of people had been driven together in the centre of town. Standing at their fore was Aiden, Andrea's father and village leader. Surrounding them lay bodies, still steaming in their own pooled blood; all that remained of the village's warriors.

"You cannot do this to us! We have done nothing wrong!"

"You have harbored dissidents... you have sheltered those that all are asked to shun. Never again. We claim your livestock as ours, your land as ours, your homes go to my men... and your women. This village, and your neighbours to the north, both burn this night. So orders the Ash Duchess."

Moving swiftly, the head guardsman drew his sword and without ceremony buried it hilt deep into Aiden's stomach. Stifling a groan, Aiden fell to the ground, followed by the howls of mourning from his wife. At first silent, the villagers became a cacophony of noise as the riders began to cut into them without mercy, spilling their blood across the hoary ground.

Where's the beast? Why aren't I changing... these people are dying... and maybe... maybe I could save them. There are so many guards though... so many... and I don't know... I... I still don't want to hurt them...

Suddenly, Will saw Andrea. She had somehow snuck behind the guardsman that had killed her father. Small and diminutive, none of the armed men had noticed her, but in her hand she held a pair of wool shears. *Andrea!*

Without warning, without hesitation, she ran forward and jabbed the shears into the groin of her father's killer.

“That’s for my faoir! This is for my husfolk!”

Another sharp thrust into the abdomen, and then a twist. *Oh god no...* The man crumpled to the ground with a loud cry, clearly seriously injured by the blows. As the villagers began to push forwards, to try and protect Andrea, one of the guardsmen caught sight of her, bloody shears and all, and with a negligent blow drove a spear through her chest... *NO! Not her!* ... pinning her through her torso to the ground behind. Something deep inside Will twisted and snapped, driving him violently to his knees. ***How could we let that happen!***

With a blurred tearing of flesh and a hazy spray of blood, Will was the beast once more. Running so fast that he could barely see, Will found he had caught Andrea as she was still falling. Hurling her up into his arms, Will disemboweled the soldier that had stabbed her, and without even looking to see the pain register on the man's face, he was away. Running through the village, leaping over the wall, crushing another marauding guardsman on his way out, Will ran through the woods. He ran until the snow-white woods became emerald jungle. He ran west. He ran to Cyntia.

I've gotta save her... only Cyntia can save her... the others... the others I can try and save later... but... Andrea... she can't die! Not now... not like this!

Travel diary, entry 6.

There is an animal in me. Something I've never had to deal with, before. Those poor men. The villagers we saved ran off, as soon as they were free. At least I think they did. I was too busy beating the bastards that had them. Somehow we surprised them... caught them off guard. Then we got their guns. Cynthia explained to me, told me how they're some guerilla military group, taking land and food from the poor people out here, choking the life out of people too small to matter. She's in some resistance group... it's all so confusing. I was too furious to listen anyway, too furious at myself. I've wandered off, to cool down, to get some perspective. Sitting on a rock, out here in the jungle, I can clear my head a little. I think I can see a village, just a little ways from here. They might be able to help me get out of here. I'm going to wander over, have a look. Maybe, if nothing else, they'll tell me what is really going on out here.

Chapter 5: Mike.

Time to start putting things right. I'm getting old... rusty. All this time, I've been treating this like I'm still on vacation, do a little odd job here, an odd job there, maybe see the sights. But this time I've screwed it all up. I guess I never really thought the guys were in trouble... they're a good group, no real black sheep. Hell, I'm the black sheep. But, somehow, this time, they've gone and stepped in it. And they're relying on me to help. Okay, maybe they don't know that. And really, Nat can be kind of a dick, so he probably thinks I'm just out getting drunk, stoned and hooked up while I'm waiting for them to rock up... but that's not how it is. Admittedly, there's been a bit of booze... and I have a hazy recollection of hookers... but definitely no drugs. Head's straight. Must be all this rain... washing out the crap, keeping me fresh. Nothing like a cold shower to bring back a little perspective. 3 days now it's been pissing down, so from here I should be able to see my house... that's how much perspective I've got... top of the damn mountain. Well, from way up here I see three things to do. First... I pay those pricks at the hotel... I've earned this money, and damned if I'm not going to spend it. Last... last I pay a visit to the only place in town I can imagine the guys are... shadiest bar around, running the local rackets... they have to be there. Even the cops are working for them... Christ, I can't believe I didn't think of that. I should have known that if whoever is running this joint has the pull to close down the locals, they've got the cash and the stones to bribe a few uniforms. Gettin sidetracked... can't lose focus... that's last. First comes the bill... and second... second I go and get my gun...

*

First stop... reception.

“Heya, I’d like to pay my bill.”

You know, asshole. The bill. The one you practically nailed to my balls.

“Oh, certainly sir. May I see your room card? Thank you...”

Here. Room card. Shove it up your ass. Couldn’t just ask me for the damn room number... oh no... gotta be a smart ass about it. Bet he’s just going to hang onto that card til the cash is in his hands too... damn... have I been that badly behaved a guest? I recall something about a potted plant being piddled on... maybe it holds a grudge.

“Tic toc, pal... how’s that bill coming?”

Shoulda brought the damn thing with me... this is all just a game... they’re trying my patience... see if I’ll lose it and storm out. No way. pal. Not in this weather... and anyways, better things to do tonight than go bed shopping.

“One moment more, Sir... ahh... your bill has come to a total of 610 dollars...”

Well, that's me fucked. Guess I'll be lookin after all...

“... which, less your 300 dollar group deposit, comes to 310 dollars.”

“Here ya go...”

Here. You don't know it, but I did the stupidest thing in my life to get that money. Not that you'd care... tight fisted moustache swirling drink-Nazi.

“Thank you, Sir. Your receipt and room card. Will there be anything else?”

“You know what... you could do me a favour... my minibar seems to be dry. Fix it up, for when I get back? I'm ducking out for a few... think I could use a drink when I get back. Long night ahead, you understand?”

Long night... might be a little cut up, too. Can't ever underestimate how good scotch is at cleaning cuts and scrapes. Does wonders for bruises, concussions and flesh wounds, too... it's all about dulling the pain...

“I'll see to it myself, Sir.”

“Oh, and pal? No more games, no more fucking notes... you want more money, talk to me direct. Pussy foot around like that, how am I supposed to respect ya?”

“Very good, Sir.”

Jesus... I'm such a dick. Now I'm taking out my bad temper on just any wandering asshole... watch as I beat old ladies that take too long to go up staircases... and wallop screaming children as they play in the street... gotta get a grip. Stay cool, keep cool, look cool. Can't keep it cool... get yourself in trouble fast.

*

I really shoulda given you a name, baby. All the cool detectives give their piece a name... cool heroes, too. But you're all about death, power. There's no way any old name woulda fit. What the hell could I possibly call you? It's not like you're a magnum... or a desert eagle. It is one thing to smuggle a revolver around, another thing entirely to try it with a hand cannon. You're just so... compact. Guys don't give nicknames to compact things... never heard of anyone calling their VW a name... or their pocket knife. Shit...just a gun. Plain, old... clean, deadly. Sounds like a goddamned Listerine ad. Well... no name... but you've got a home now... right here, shoulder holster...do me a favour, while we're sharing this intimate embrace... don't bite my damn nipples off. No way I could explain that one away. 6 bullets loaded... safety off... really hate having you cuddle up all unsafe-like... leads to accidents. But you and me, baby... we're gonna get some answers. Sit tight, keep your mouth shut unless spoken to first, and let me do aaaallll the talkin. You weren't ever very good at being all polite-like. Sweet talkin, that's my thing.

*

So here we are, baby. Hottest night spot in town. Only night spot in town. 'The Original Sin'... what sort of tosser thought that one up? Doesn't matter... front doors open, neons are burning the night sky, and the bouncer on the door can't be taller than 5'3". Looking good so far. Don't smile now... cool people don't smile at clubs, bars... nervous people do. 16 year olds thinking they'll get carded... winos trying to sneak in and cash in a coupon... cool people are all about the walk... no talk, just scowls and attitude. Yeah, I can do this. Yeah... real smooth. Real subtle. Thank you Mr Bouncer... that's it buddy, keep the line moving. Aaand we're in. Oh... wow. I don't know why these guys are pushing so hard to close every other place around here down... they're pretty much in a league of their own already.

Mike sauntered over to the bar, ordered a rusty nail, and sat down. Turning on his stool, he took in the sights, watching the floor show... dancers in cages, hanging over a dance floor half-filled with hot, sweaty bodies.

I'm not seein it. This place is kinda hot... sure... like the cages, very 80's... you'd think I was in Beverly Hill's Cop or something. But this place isn't full... and if people aren't going anywhere else... where the hell are they? Should be a lot more people out, town this size, weekend... even the weather isn't too bad right now. Gotta be something more goin' on here.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike caught a glimmer of chrome-reflected neon. Reluctantly turning from the nubile dancers' gyrations, he made out the vague outline of a concealed door. It was partially hidden, obscured by a pseudo fern jungle. Keeping with the jungle theme, the lighting was muted and apart from the unfortunately placed piece of chrome striping along the length of the wall and door, the shadows helped to not only obfuscate, but also discourage curious patrons from getting too close to the darkened jungle maw.

Yeah... something else. The tone of this place... it seems too light. Too airy. Most of the money to be made in having a club comes from the private shows, the drugs, and the back door dealings... guess I've found my back door. Now how the hell do I saunter over... yeah... okay, no reason to go there... damn. Oh, wait... yeah. Got it. Good old fake mobile call... wish I had a mobile... no worries... battery pack from the camera... shove it up real close under my face... start talking... fingers in ears... 'yeah yeah, can't hear ya man, lemme move somewhere quieter...' smiling at the bartender now... don't wanna stand out as a cool guy, just wanna slip away... here we go. This place is pretty dark... and I bet from around the corner, you can't even see what's going on... or hear it. Shit... no handles... how the hell do I get in? Does the bartender buzz you in? Someone's gotta be watching... well, nothing for it... c'mon baby, they've probably already seen us... no point being quiet now...

Gun hidden under his coat, but firmly in hand, Mike walked into the shadows. Taking a casual glance around and seeing nothing, Mike leaned back and placed a solid kick against the door. First one, then another, and with a muted

wrenching sound, the door, lock, and a sizeable chunk of cheap plasterboard wall fell inwards. Not hearing any immediate outcry, Mike ducked inside before anyone could glance his way.

Well... no one is going to be keeping anybody out with that door tonight... why even bother having a security door that's made of such cheap... looks like there's lots of corridors back here... no time like the present. Damn... this place is huge...

Walking forwards slowly, gun extended, Mike found himself confronted by two more diminutive security-looking types. Before he could either shoot or threaten to, one had reached forwards, slapping the inside of his wrist in one direction and the outside of his hand with the other. His gun shot sideways, landing with a cheap plastic noise somewhere down an intersecting corridor. The second man came in low, head down, hands extended. Mike's left fist balled up, shot downwards, slamming the man on the back of the head and dropping him to his knees. *Can't avoid what you can't see, dickwad.* Quickly kneeing the stunned man in the face, Mike raised his guard... *too late...* as his first attacker's booted foot shot upwards at an alarming angle. Mike watched the sweeping arc of the foot as it came smashing down over his guard. With a sickening crunch the kick connected, flattening his nose against his face. Nose spewing out blood, Mike reeled and slipped backwards, fighting for room to clear his head, gain an advantage. *Too damn fast... little bastards are always the vicious ones...* Feinting under Mike's pugilist guards, the small bouncer stepped quickly over the unconscious man. Twisting his hips as he approached, he caught Mike off guard

as he delivered a rib jarring kick. Winded, Mike found himself on the defensive as the kicks came one after another. Each strike forced Mike backwards, each blow leaving him fighting for breath against shock and pain. Finally, the boot again shot upwards, and Mike lost sight of it. He didn't see it connect squarely under his jaw, but he felt it. The impact slammed his head backwards violently, smashing Mike's head against the wall before he slid unconscious to the floor.

*

...and then I woke up here.

Drip.

Tied to a fucking bondage bench.

DripDrip.

Just my luck... they're going to sodomize me before they're done with me.

At least I'm not all gimped up. Shoulda known it'd be something really...

Driiiiiip.

...shady back here... god damned S&M club too... these guys have got everything cornered. Bet there's lots of interesting things going on in those other rooms, too... but no sign of the...

Drip, trickle. DripDrip. Drip.

...guys or anything here. Maybe they're out back, somewhere else. Maybe I'm just too fucking late, as usual. I can see it now, I'll be sitting in hell... they're gonna call me up, and the first word's outta Nat's mouth are gonna be, "Where the fuck were you, man? You're never on time." Son of

Dripdrip.

...a bitch. They better be alive... Face feels like a lorry parked on it... how'd that little bastard kick so high? And in steel caps. Teeth are still there, nose stopped bleeding. Ribs burn like hell. Least nothing's broken... yet. Gotta add that yet... never know what the future holds.

Driiiiiip.

Except drips. Future's always full of drips.

"I know you can HEAR me you pricks! Enough of the fucking Chinese water torture... Jesus Christ, haven't you assholes seen the WEATHER?!"

Nothing like a cold shower to bring back a little perspective.

Red 5, I'm going in!

Okay, I've worked out where they're holding Erik. I can't wait for someone to get off their ass and do it for me, so I'm gonna bust in there and get him. I'm Jack Burton, man, in and out, like the wind. Really gonna shake the pillars of heaven. Nothin's gonna stand in my way, not tonight.

Chapter 6: Jonathon.

Somehow, this just doesn't feel right. Where are the alarms... where are the guards? We've been inside the walls for an hour now, sneaking around in underground tunnels and waterways, and not one person has even crossed our path. Nothing is down here. There's no way... What the... what the hell is wrong now?

Turning, Jonathon saw his companions had again stopped. Despite only being underground for an hour, the oppressive nature of the environment, combined with the unknown danger of Vector's punishment was evoking a flight response in his survival-oriented companions. Each intersection led to a new round of heated, yet muffled arguments, and on no less than two occasions Burner and Trigga had been forced to physically restrain Jet while they again discussed their progress. Sighing, Jonathon moved back to the group and tried to lighten the tension.

"Soo... got any more of that tasty dirt?"

"Man, you're worse than Jet... no dirt here, none for days. Told you that much, right right?"

"Trigga, he's just tryin to unchicken, leave him 'lone. Jet, man, we can't keepn stoppn. We're here, right, save the guys, right? This guy... this guy he's

different, he's gonna lead us... take care of Vector. We's runnin too long, man. Gotta fight."

"I'm not 'fraid of fightin', Burnah... I's 'fraid of squishin. Dis place gets smallernsmaller, and dis guy aint got no clue... he's wanderin us in circles, man."

"I'm sure he's got SOME clue... the elder said to follow, so we're followin, man. Keep it up, yeah? Two hams on da wheely, that sorta thing right? 'cides... we've been all round Alpha before man... we've gotta be under da middle now... its not THAT big, right?"

"You know... it never even occurred to me that any of you might be, erm, claustrophobic..."

"Claustrowhatic?"

"It means scared of enclosed spaces..."

"Space? We're not scared of space, closed or open. It's just... we've never been away from the sun, right? In the sun, we can see shadows, see guards coming... under here... its all too close, can't see nuffin before it's gonna happen, right?"

"Yeah, guys, it's okay... I understand... look, if we're about halfway under the city, like you said... it's probably about time we head up, anyway. Somehow, I

doubt Vector's sitting here under the sewers... not with that great big tower in the middle of AlphaPrime... that's where I'd go, right to the top."

"To the top? You're mad, right? Everyone knows the way to Vector is down... down here, in the heart... not up there, in the head. Right?"

"Guys... look... see that? That looks like a rat, sorta. And floating past? That's a turd. If you honestly think Vector is sitting down here on a floating desk, surrounded by turds and rats, that's fine. But where I come from, the big boss goes to the top of the tower... as far from the rats and turds as you can get. Skulk around down here all you like, run away, whatever. I'm going up, first chance I get."

"..."

"Fine... take us up. Maybe we'll see the sun again, before we get chopped up or zombibrained or whatever."

"That's better... come on, can't be far. Hey, you know, where I came from... the sun... it was a hell of a lot brighter than yours... yellow, not all reddish..."

"Shaddup about the damn sun... just wanna get out, see what happens... gonna die young, so quit talkin til we get old already."

*

Cautiously, Jonathon advanced into a small doorway. Behind him, Trigga silenced Jet. Peering cautiously, Jonathon found a gigantic chamber, unsealed, and unguarded. Inside, machinery could be heard working, a faint hum that carried through the air and resonated in the walls. Sniffing, Jonathon could smell something familiar, like the faintest tang of oil, and maybe even just a trace of overheated silicon, like a long-running computer or dusty tv. Urging his companions to stay back, Jonathon stuck his head into the chamber, expecting alarms to sound and guards to appear. Instead, he nearly fell over at what he saw.

An elevator... so ancient... looks like something from the 50's. Carved wood... lacquer... where the hell would they get that much wood here? Nothing even close to a tree that could make that... but its wood... feels like wood too... maybe it's some disused elevator... fancy back door shaft maybe. How long does wood even last, if you look after it?

“What da hell is dat thin?”

“I think it’s an elevator.”

“Elevator... like a piston, lifts things up?”

“Noo... well, yes. But it doesn’t work like that... at least I don’t think it does. It’s for taking people up and down... like for different floors and stuff.”

“Yep. Like a piston.”

“Totally. People piston.”

“Yes, but...”

“Absolutely a piston.”

“You know what, fuck it, it’s just like a piston, okay? Just get in the damn thing.”

“In... in where? It’s a wall, man. Got magic powers, walkin’ through?”

“No... right... you guys... you’re bright, right?”

“Like ta think so, man.”

“And technologically savvy, right?”

“Yepyep, bigtime tech guys.”

“So what I’m gonna suggest to you here, it might seem a little out of left field...”

“Go ahead, we’re all ears, oldtimer.”

“Try pushing that big goddamned button?”

“Ohh.”

“Button, right.”

“Never seen one like dat before... so big and shiny...”

With a smooth hiss, the doors to the elevator slid open as Burner pushed the button.

“Okay everybody in... good. Doors closing... going up.”

As the doors shut, Burner leaned over to Jonathon and whispered in his ear.

“Geez, man, you’re can be a tad condescendin’ sometimes...”

*

As the elevator slid up, a red light picked out their progress among a series of dots. Assuming that Vector would be closer to the top, Jonathon had picked the highest floor available. He hadn’t expected the elevator would take anywhere near this long to climb, however, and after five minutes they had still only reached halfway.

“Okay guys... get out your guns... I know it looks like we’ve got ages, but you may as well get ready... oh... nevermind...”

Turning to face his companions, Jonathon found Burner had already drawn his pistols, Jet was busy loading some hefty looking projectiles into his unusual firearm, and Trigga was lining up a laser sight on the back of Burner’s head, unbeknownst to him.

“Man, the guns were out when the wall shut... pssh.”

“Oh hey, it’s just occurred to me... you know, all this leading and all, no one ever thought to give me a gun...”

“Oh, we thought about it. Then we thought about you shooting it. We’re seein bits of you fly off as you point it the wrong way, bits of us flyin off when your grip slips... bits of hot metal flyin off from bad shots. No ordnance for you. You know old tech, oldtimer, but these, these are our babies... you don’t borrow someone’s baby, right? Anyway, we figure we do the shootin, you do the leadin. Division of labour, right man?”

“Fine fine, you shoot, I’ll cower in fear until someone shoots me. Division of labour my ass. What do you guys think we’re gonna find?”

“Death.”

“Always the god damned realist, aren’tcha Jet? Shutup. We’re gonna find some wrinkly old man, sittin in a chair or somethin, leads in his head, rulin the world, man.”

“Nah, nah... Vector’s like... this spirit thing, right? So we’re gonna find some ghostman, floatin round, leading with waves of his wispy fingers...”

“Like I said... death.”

“Hmph. Me, I’m going with an alien. Who else would live so long?”

“Oooh, good one.”

*

The elevator doors slid open with a quiet swoosh. Stale air greeted Jonathon’s lungs, and he tried not to cough. Peering out from behind Burner, he couldn’t see anyone or anything ahead, so he cautiously stepped forward.

“Greetings, Relic. I am Vector.”

Oh crap...

“Uhm, I can’t see you...”

“Certainly you can. I am all around you. This is my mind, and while in it you can hear what I think, see what I see. Perhaps even know what I know, if you remain long enough. No one has ever remained long enough, before.”

“Okay... guys, keep the guns handy... we might need to make a mess... but first, seeing as Vector wants to talk... lemme talk.”

“’aight.”

“Go ahead... talkin aint our thing.”

“So... what are you... an alien?”

“I am not. Nor am I a ghost. Nor an elderly human. Amusing as those ideas are. I am a merely a will, a direction. I am Vector. I have been left here, in this place, to guide humanity’s vestiges. I remain to keep control.”

“Through mind control and manipulation... but why? What the hell is it you are doing, exactly?”

“I serve as a guardian. I mother the citizens of AlphaPrime, guide their education and lives, provide entertainment and nourishment, and maintain the status quo. Things are as they were for thousands of years, just as they shall remain until the end.”

“And do... do you know where my friends are? Did you take them? Why did you put this damn thing in my head?!”

“Man, this aint cool... we aint here to chitchat, lets blast ordnance and jet, man...”

“I need to know, guys...”

“The implant is for your benefit, to help you fit in. It was necessary.”

“But, you didn’t even ask me... you just ripped my head open, and shoved it in there...”

“It was deemed necessary. Your feelings were irrelevant, the technology was required, so it was installed.”

“You bastard... you didn’t even ask! And my friends? Did you do this to them? Where are they?”

“Your friends are not here. They are not in this timeframe, but I do not doubt that they still exist.”

“They’re alive, somewhere?”

“Just a guess. I have to admit, I don’t really care.”

“Uhm... what?”

“Well it is not like I am required to care. Your friends are outside of the pattern. Neither citizen, nor Wildman, they are beyond my kith and kin. But I would speculate that they still survive, simply not here.”

“... how did I get here? Can I get back?”

“Man, now really isn’t the time...”

“Shutup shutup shutup... this...thing brought me here... it’s the only one who can send me back...”

“I did not bring you here.”

“But... the amber drops...”

“Were not a development of mine. The AlphaPrime populace believe that they are an expression of my will, but in all honesty I am unsure of how they came to exist. Perhaps it is something that will happen in the future.”

“So... you can’t help me?”

“I didn’t say that. I could design the tech to send you home, backwards in time is so simple... it is into a place we have already seen, already know... forwards remains a mystery... something that I cannot yet achieve. Nor have any motivation to, truth be told.”

“This is bullshit... you don’t bring people here... you don’t do anything? Then why the hell do you keep them in check then, down there? Why keep them so damn controlled?”

“Yeah, you tech bastard! Why? Where are our people?”

“The people below are in control because that is my function. I maintain the status quo. When the end comes, they will be free. I simply serve until the end.”

“The end... you keep saying the end... the end of what? Time?”

“No... the end of Vector. At some point, somewhere, a new direction will come for the people of AlphaPrime... a new vector. And when that time comes, I will be fulfilled.”

“Hey, you son of a bitch... you didn’t answer my question, right? Where... are... they? The Interlopers!?!”

“Interlopers... Do you not understand? This is a closed system. I maintain a closed system. There are only limited resources... I am unable to conceive of new ideas unaided. So to maintain my vector, I am required to utilize the natural, replenishable resources. The citizens utilize my creative potential... which in turn I absorb from the Wildmen. The Wildmen are released periodically into the wild, by my will, and are in turn harvested for their neural content.”

“Harvested, wha?”

“What the hell, man?”

“You do not understand... let me show you...”

A large panel in the far end of the room opened with a loud hiss. Chill gases fell slowly from the chamber beyond. Inside the chamber, contained in clear glass cabinets, stood row upon row of Interlopers. Each was naked, and had a variety of cables and cords inserted into their bodies, particularly their crown. Progressing from left to right, they appeared to be sicker and sicker. Each face held an expression of pain or fear, and each body looked contorted, with white knuckled fingers and tensed muscles.

“The Wildmen are the renewable resource here... it is from them that I am nourished, and in turn I nourish the citizens. They are the creative and

biological food source for AlphaPrime, and are vital to my continued operation. I am the Vector, and in turn they are the Velocity.”

November 11th

So, we're going back. Well, we are back. We're standing outside, right now, concealed in the trees. I'm going to show these guys how to get back in, and then that's probably that. I can't help them, can't shoot a gun, and really, really don't feel like dying today. So I'm going to get in, maybe steal a jeep or something, a radio, and get the fuck out of here. Who knows, maybe the guys are inside, if any of them made it, and I can pick them up too. No guilty conscience here, I'm helping, just not going to stand around for the fireworks.

Thought for the day: Prickle bushes make bad cover.

Chapter 6: Erik.

Erik was taken to an old barracks, hidden away in a courtyard at the far end of the castle. He still found himself escorted by two brutish armed guards the entire way. They deposited him without much decorum on the barracks doorstep. Gathering his dignity, Erik knocked once, and without waiting for a reply pushed open the door. *Why pussy foot about? These guys are soldiers, they aren't going to respect me if I start by meowing at the door.* Opening smoothly on oiled hinges, the door soundlessly swung open, showing Erik the rather unexpected sight of a clean, well kept bunks in an otherwise spartan, almost austere room. No one waited inside, so Erik's bravado slipped away as he quietly shut the door behind him. Looking around, he was impressed at the serious nature of the room, and despite the stark surroundings, there wasn't an oppressive feel. *These guys must be pretty professional... no clutter... no trophies. Still, the fire was left blazing, the windows are un-shuttered, it all feels kinda... homey. Bit like a hunting lodge.* Stacked neatly in rows along the wall were various weapons, 5 slots presumably for 5 men, and from each rack a weapon or two had been taken. *Two axeman... four swordsmen...two bowmen...one crossbowman... two maces... maybe they double up...*

Without preamble, a leather gloved hand caught him neatly across his mouth, while mailed gauntlets quickly grabbed his arms and feet. Caught fast, without thinking Erik slammed his head back and started to wriggle, trying to slip free before his attackers were prepared. His head caught on the edge of a steel helmet, but he heard with some satisfaction muffled curses through the ringing in

his ears. Diving forward, using his weight, Erik pulled free of the grip on his arms, and fell flat to the ground. Kicking, quickly rolling, Erik manoeuvred onto his back. *Damn.* Unarmed, he found himself looking up at four heavily armed and armoured men. Crossing his legs, hoping to avoid a steel-booted kick to the groin, and raising as much of a guard as a prone man can, Erik waited to see what would happen next. *I wonder where the fifth guy is...* Suddenly, a barrel-chested man in chain-mail with an eye-patch started laughing. The man Erik had head-butted, who had maintained a stoic act after his initial response now dropped all pretense and began gingerly pushing at his nose. Another man quickly stepped over to his bunk, and began sorting through his belongings, while the fourth man went and closed the door.

“So, who the hell would you be, riffling through our things?”

“I could ask you the same thing... erm, the who are you bit anyway. I was sent here... I’m sorry, I am supposed to be joining some company ... and no one was here...”

“So you decided to snoop around. Guess you’ve already picked your bunk then, eh?”

“I...”

“It is fine, man. There are not exactly many choices, after all. The name’s Padraig... most call me Patch... reason is staring you in the face. The rat-faced

man busily bleeding into his fine leather gloves is Adem. Here, next to me, this is Hamish. And yon bastard checking his coin there is Creag... don't mind him, once he knows you haven't touched a golden crown, he'll go back to just ignoring you. Stop squatting there, man, up... and tell us your name."

"I'm Erik...uh hi... pleased to meet you. I'm sorry, guess you hadn't heard about me ..."

"Well no, we don't normally stealthily restrain new recruits... we tend to save that sort of thing for the first week, ifn ye get my mind. So you must be pretty new, to just strut in here cock o' the walk and not expect a bit of a drubbin'."

"Sorry? Yeah... real out of townner... I think I'm just put here to keep me busy, to tell you the truth... something about the... Queen... erm, not wanting me to wander too far."

"Oh... the Morrigan. Stands to reason, I s'pose... stands to reason. Guess you're the man's come to free us from her icy grasp, aye? Oh no, lad, no love for the Morrigan here. We're about as disloyal as you get in the Queen's own militia, aye? Not two moons back, her royalness sent us out, track down some of the fiends plaguing the farmers... not tellin' us four teams like as us had fallen short. But we're the best... and we walked back, carcasses over our shoulder. Including one of our own... poor Fearghus... face chewed off before he even knew what hit him..."

“Face chewed off? Uhm, what exactly do you guys do?”

“Us? Oh lad, she didn’t tell you!? We’re monster hunters... welcome aboard.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me...”

“Speaking of kidding... what’s with the severed arm there, boyo?”

*

That evening, Erik learned a lot more about the men he would be riding with. Although treated as scouts by the militia at large, they were more like bounty hunters. They were often sent out to deal with a plague of mythological horrors that constantly threatened the outlying townsfolk. Patch was their leader, having ascended to the role in place of the unfortunate Fearghus. Bunking early, heading out on a prolonged scouting run in the morning, Erik had not had any more time to question the group and their intentions, but he had already made strong first impressions.

*

Just before sunup, Patch quietly shook Erik awake. Gathering weapons from the wall racks, Erik got his first real inkling of the roles these men played.

Patch grabbed both axes, and a large zweihander that looked as deadly as it was unwieldy. Creag took up a mace and a crossbow, and attached a modified buckler to his arm. Hamish chose a longbow and a long sword, forgoing strength for ease of movement. Finally, Adem drew two short blades that were quickly concealed inside modified gauntlets. Erik himself took a longbow down from the racks, and accompanied it with a long sword.

“You said the Morrigan thought you were fey... mebbe we can find a broom, a grove, maybe a pretty dress...”

“That sounds like a great idea, but I don’t know anything about that sort of stuff... these I can use... and I’d rather be useful than just standing around.”

After they were kitted out, Patch grabbed an extra long bow and a mace from the wall.

“Don’t you think you’ve got enough?”

“Don’t be funny. This is for Fearghus.”

“Sorry, you said he’d died?”

“Oh, he’s dead, right enough. Dead as his brother and uncle and pa that rode before him... but when we ride out, he rides out with us. In spirit, if not in the flesh. Come along, you’ll learn.”

Walking out back, Erik found five horses stabled, along with a rudimentary smithy. Continuing past, Patch and the others went to a small garden, attached to the courtyard. Inside, a small monument stood. Not dedicated to any one man, seemingly, but instead portraying a faceless horseman, battling unseen foes, unarmed and unaided. Gingerly, respectfully, Patch slipped the bow across the shoulders of the statue, and in his out-flung hand placed the hilt of the sword.

“Is that him?”

“Aye, after a fashion. He rides with us, whenever we go. He just needs someone to bring him his weapons. This effigy represents the fallen amongst us, and while he stands whole, we shall never stop fighting. Somethin’ of a throwback, from nobler years... the last great hero... he made this statue... it is into his hands we put the weapon, and it is said that no matter what weapon is put there, the grip will hold true. Still, with Fearghus’s sword the fit has never seemed so right. Let’s saddle up... don’t want to keep Fearghus waiting.”

“‘Into his hands?’ Do you mean it’s the hero, like, actually the hero?”

“Oh aye... dangerous work, hunting beasties. Poor bastard got himself turned to stone... but he did much good, before his end. Let’s hope the next does the same, eh?”

*

The first day out with the scouting party was arduous for Erik. Each member of the party, from Patch down to Adem, demanded that he prove himself in some way or other. For Patch, it was riding skill, and the pair rode a quarter mile against the wind, fighting with sticks while the others watched on. Eventually Patch swatted Erik to the ground, but with his jovial laugh he had commended Erik's attempts. At midday, Creag had dared Erik to drink from his hip flask. Carefully sniffing, Erik had found the odour unusually biting, and had declined. Smiling as he emptied out murky swamp water from the flask, Creag had patted him on the back and gone back to his meal. By dusk, Hamish had demanded an archery contest. While Erik had been unable to beat Hamish along the long course he had set up, he was impressed when Erik had turned mid-shot to bring down a game bird in the poor light for dinner. Finally, come nightfall, as they settled in, Adem had challenged Erik to see who could put out the fire first.

Jeez... these guys are really competitive with everything...

Waking early in the morning, and forgoing breakfast to make up for lost time the day before, Patch's party of scouts had forged ahead. Their fresh horses took them deep into the borderlands, and eventually alongside the grey miasma. They had traveled on for half a day in comparative silence. Eventually, Erik found his curiosity getting the better of him.

"So, this miasma... I've never seen anything like it..."

"You're really not from here?"

“Sorry... far away... what is it?”

“It is the boundary... and the snare. The Morrigan’s trap, to be truthful, damn the bitch. Long ago... the miasma, it was said to be a shield... it held back evil from the land, and only let good come through. That’s how the heroes came, you see. But the blasted Morrigan Queen... she did something... well, no one knows for sure, but she’s the only one that can control them, so legend says... and now, monsters come through. Dark, vicious, and ruthless... they’re tearing the land apart. Farmers, villagers... all are harassed... but no more so than out here. Ten years ago, no one even thought to take up arms at night... now, try finding a villager that doesn’t.”

“But why would the Queen want that to happen?”

“Who knows for sure, aye? But they say, this one... she fears the heroes... wicked as she is... she knows that if heads are to roll, her sinful little one would be first on the block. And that’s why she’s drawn tight the veil... and in doing so, she’s let the darkness in once more.”

“Veil... did you say...?”

“Shh, what’s that.”

“I don’t...”

A pained look from Patch silenced Erik, while the others drew close to whisper.

“Sounds like screaming...”

“Must be a new one... damnit all, why now.”

“Okay, silver edges only... whatever it is, screams like that, that says silver to me, aye?”

Drawing silver bolts and arrowheads, the scouts rode without reins or grips. They moved swiftly through the forest, towards the screams. They were too late. Pained cries still echoing through the woods, nothing living remained on the ground to utter them. Instead carcasses lay casually torn apart, cast into low lying tree branches or pinned upon them.

“Men... this beastie looks a bad one. Leave the horses, bring only your weapons... from here, it’s all on foot.”

“We’re leaving everything here?”

“Look around, man. Trees are thicker here. So we’ll go in, see if we can’t find a spoor, or a path. The monster we’re chasing isn’t going to be a small one,

aye? This is near where it was last seen, so we've got a real chance at finding the trail... unless your Wyrd is tingling, that is?"

"... let's go then."

*

Walking quickly through the woods, Erik and the others had heard the heavy footfalls of a soldier regiment. *Must be those damn leaded boots.* Stealthily moving up to them, Patch had greeted them silently. A quick and whispered discussion, and the groups joined. Now ten strong, the men, under Patch's direction, headed along a freshly torn path. Huge swathes of woodland had been torn out ahead, letting the party travel quickly, weapons ready. Erik had drawn a silver-tipped arrow, and held it loosely in his bow, but his fingers hesitated on the string as he saw what lay ahead. *Oh my god, no...* Coming across a slumbering shape ahead, Patch had urged his group to silence, and to circle the beast. Unfortunately, one of the guardsman had stepped on a twig as he halted mid stride, too conscious of his crossbow and not of his path. *Oh damn oh bugger, what do I do...* Suddenly, the beast leapt to its feet, and with a blur of violent speed, it had leapt upon him and torn out his throat before the ill aimed bolt had shot into a guardsman ahead of him. *Oh no, it's going to kill me next...* Kicking backwards from the dying man, the creature had leapt across 3 metres and landed firmly atop Hamish and a guardsman, smashing hard into the two men and tearing out one of Hamish's collarbones as they fell.

The guardsman wasn't so lucky, as the fiend's wild flailings tore him asunder. Patch had leapt to Hamish's aid, but hadn't swung his axes into the melee. Around him, men were still preparing to charge. Left flatfooted, none of the other men would be able to save Hamish, however. Only Erik could bring the brute down in time. *Oh damn, I can't do this... I can't do this... I've never...* Closing his eyes, truly afraid for his own life more than anyone else's, Erik let his arrow fly. A scream greeted his shot, and Erik expectantly opened his eyes. *Oh no...* Sticking out of Patch's shoulder was his arrow, having dug through his chain mail at such a close distance. Pulling it out with an irritated snarl, he cast it back in Erik's direction.

"Stupid bastard, eyes open! Hit the Cu Sidhe!"

Cool, calm and collected, Creag had drawn his crossbow, and Adem had recovered one from the unfortunately mauled guard. Firing almost simultaneously, their bolts hit the beast in the back of his skull. Continuing to fire, they dropped it to the ground, snarling. It rolled onto its back, and Patch quickly stuck an axe in, before moving to pull Hamish free. Just as they were nearly clear, the monster raised a bloodied paw, looking to strike out. *Calm calm, just stay calm...* No longer panicked, having recovered some of his nerve, Erik swiftly stepped in and delivered a sharp boot to the beast's punctured skull. His face a mask of hatred, he struck again and again as the others drew blade and proceeded to hack into the beast. One more kick to the head, and finally, the abhorrence closed its eyes. *I've never been so scared... scared of what? Is this in my mind or not? Am I...how could this be? This isn't me... how could I imagine a monster like that?*

Day 7.

We were out on patrol. Well, I was out looking for my friends, but the soldiers were patrolling. They'd given me a gun, because apparently there are violent rebels out here or something. We got attacked, and the man driving next to me was shot, and crashed the jeep. We were under fire, and they were screaming at me to help them, so I shot back. It was another hallucination too, I saw a monster. I hit a guy. I was so scared, so panicked. I think he's alive, I don't know. We chased off the others, and he's in the back... in a sack or something, some impromptu thing. I can't look... my hands are shaking. I hate guns... I'm never firing one again.

Chapter 6: Will.

Bleeding and exhausted, Will stumbled through the trees. In his arms, he held a mortally wounded child. Naked, shivering from cold and the innumerable lacerations through his flesh, the deep wounds in his side and back that he didn't remember receiving, the child was colder still. Hunger wracked his body, but he tried to push it aside. Human, alone, afraid, he blinked back tears from his eyes, fought the urge to look into the dying child's eyes, and instead pressed forward. His bare feet were flayed raw, and each painful step left a sickly, bloody footprint upon the lichen underfoot. Having passed the danger of the pillaging soldiers, Will had been unable to maintain his animalistic self, and had returned to his natural state. Again, tears burned in his eyes, fear for the icy blue child that lay in his arms.

It can't be much further... I can't make it much further. She can't either. I've gotta get her to Cyntia... she has to be here! She can't have left... she was right here... I was sure... so sure. No one else can save her... and maybe... maybe there's still time. Cyntia! Where the hell are you!

Succumbing to blood loss and pain, Will's numb hands started to lose their grip on the girl. Running for hours over rugged terrain, barefoot and injured, had taken its toll, and there was simply no way they would make it where they needed to go. *It's just not possible... I can't do it. No one can... it's over. She's dead, and there's nothing I can do about it. No... no... NO! I can do this... we can. She has to live... she can't just die in my arms... it's not going to happen! It's not going to*

happen! Tears once more formed in Will's eyes, but no longer were they tears of grief. Anger blurred his vision, sheeting his eyes in a bloody red haze. Muscles too tired to even spasm were invigorated, the burning desire for revenge and hatred surging within him. Around him, the world seemed to reel, and he felt a slow, relentless sensation in his limbs, his skin, his bones. In a soul-wracking tearing of noise and light and pain, Will was again the beast. His eyes cleared, and his enhanced senses took in the dying girl. ***She still breathes, blood still pumps. Maybe there is still time.*** Will tightened his grip on the child, as much as to warm her as to keep his grip, and with powerful strides he surged ahead.

Taking care not to injure Andrea further, Will traveled swiftly. In minutes that lay hours away only moments ago, he drew towards his destination. His nose caught the faint, familiar scent of an old woman. ...*not far*... Will dashed through the jungle, knocking aside trees and boulders in his urgency, his injuries forgotten. The small girl lying coldly in his arms tore into his soul; he couldn't face losing anymore of his sense of self, anymore than he could face losing her.

*

"Can you help her?"

"I don't understand... perhaps I can find her family, arrange for a burial..."

"No, can you save her?! Like you did... with me."

“Oh... Will... I am sorry... I cannot do this thing... what you ask... what you ask takes energies that I cannot... it is too soon. And I don't... there are no others like us here.”

“Then I'll do it!”

“You cannot... you're too... you can't even control the change... you don't even know what you are. It is not possible... you can't be strong enough... not yet.”

“Cyntia, how do I do it? Tell me... she's dead if we don't try something... and I... I can't let that happen. I just can't.”

“Is there pain, my friend?”

“Yes. She... she was... is so young... and she... she doesn't deserve to die... she only tried to help... and to save her father. She... she even trusted me...”

“What you are suggesting is hardly much better... you want to make her like us... once made, that decision isn't something that can be changed. In you... in you I saw a spirit that was not ready to pass... you fought hard for your survival... and to let you die when I could save you would simply not be right... but this one... where is the fight?”

“That’s why? That’s why you did what you did? But...you don’t know... she... she fought! That is why she is here... like this. She was outnumbered... her village was ransacked... and still she fought... and... and they killed her for it. You cannot let this happen!”

“I will tell you. I will tell you what to do... and it can be in fate’s hand... but you cannot baulk... you must do exactly as I say... if you do not... you might as well build her cairn now.”

“Do it.”

“You must place your hand... your human hand... inside her chest... and... you must eat a piece of her heart. In turn... you must offer a piece of yours... from the beast...”

To save her life, it must be done. I don’t want to hurt you...but I can’t just watch you die...I wish there was another way...

Dying, the child still managed to scream as Will’s hand dug deep into her perforated chest, and tore a bloody chunk of heart muscle out with his fingernails. The screaming continued well into the night, long after a piece of Will’s heart had replaced the missing muscle tissue.

*

Those cowards... they are not going to let them get away with this... I couldn't stop them before... but I can avenge those murdered families now.

Stalking through the icy woodlands once more, Will's senses detected another guard patrol. Having left the child in Cyntia's care, her fate unforeseeable, Will had returned to the village; in its place, he instead found a funeral pyre. Before him, smoldering huts and charcoal heaped high with bodies, charred and smoking. Aiden's cadaver had been placed atop the grisly pile, as if sat upon a throne. Burnt and scorched, the remainder of his face still held an expression of pained surprise. Upon seeing the defiled village elder, Will had made a decision. *No more... I just can't let this go. These people... they were my friends... even if it was only for a short while. First one set of friends, and another... I keep losing people that I call friend. Never again. **Tonight, I hunt.** Tonight, the scum who did this will be held accountable... tonight, those bastards will die.*

*

The next few hours for Will passed in gory flashes of human misery. He encountered several small patrols, some still bloodied from the atrocities at the village, and all reeking of smoke and burning flesh. As each patrol passed by, Will leapt upon them. Some he tore asunder. Others he devoured alive. Still more he impaled upon their own spears, consciously recreating the child's injury. Lost in the destruction he wrought, Will managed to devour, disembowel, decapitate, or impale over thirty men in little over two hours. Each man died in pain, with even the cleanest of his kills having enough time to see and fear their killer. Silent,

nearly invisible, and driven by berserk rage, Will's beastly shape struck again and again, running for miles to pursue the faintest of scents. And with each kill, some of the pain in Will's heart subsided. With each bloody act of revenge he felt his anger easing. Finally he lay down exhausted, bloodied, and sated.

Drowsing, sticky in drying blood matted through his fur, Will didn't hear the patrol that finally chanced upon him, until they were within range of striking. Alerted by the sudden, heavy tread of a particularly unlucky guardsman, Will leapt to his feet. Surrounding him stood no less than ten well armed men. They were in a circle, loose and wary. *Too many... too damn many... how'd they get so close so quietly? How didn't I even notice...* Seeing a guard shift his finger on his crossbow, Will leapt forward suddenly. Once more, in the face of danger, he felt his reflexes take over. Slicing with his clawed hand, he tore out the throat of the first guard, even as the bolt fired past his head and sunk into a guardsman behind him. Pushing his feet into the falling guard, Will shot backwards into another two men, and dragged them screaming to the ground in a splash of blood and bone shards. As he was starting to rise, he felt a bolt slam deep into the back of his head. Piercing his spine, just below the nape of his neck, Will lost all control of his body. Falling heavily onto the wounded guardsmen below, crushing them deep into the snow beneath his twitching form, Will could only twitch as a continuing stream of blows came raining down. Finally, a solidly placed kick drove him from consciousness. *Damn... that face... looked familiar...*

*

“So you’re the monster that has torn apart my bondsmen.”

“Urhh, wha?”

Regaining consciousness slowly, Will was relieved to feel sensation in his extremities. Movement was another matter, however, as he lay restrained, bolted onto a wooden framework with iron manacles. Unseen, his questioner stood out of view, a vague, menacing shadow in an otherwise poorly lit room. Unable to awaken the beast, to leap free, the enfeebled Will lay placid in his bonds.

“So you do live. Amazing. I watched as my chirurgeon pulled out no less than four silver bolts from your body. You are remarkable... for an abomination.”

“Wha... you... they were your... guards?”

“Guards? No. What sort of fool do you take me for? Those were my raiders. And it could perhaps be said that you did me something of a favour... they were as disagreeable as they were mercenary. Alas, now they will have to be replaced. Tell me... why did you do this?”

“Eat shit! You know why!”

A glint of steel caught in Will’s peripheral vision. A long, shining blade slowly inched down across his face, inch by inch, until it lay squarely alongside the left of his nose. With a rapid, blurred motion the blade was pulled back,

cutting deep into the flesh of Will's face, slicing through the flesh alongside his eyelid. With blood running freely across the left side of his face, Will screamed in shock and pain.

"I know many things. For example...I know you cannot die... easily, in any event. I dare say I know more about you than you do... but I want to learn more."

Once more the blade slowed traced its way into Will's vision.

"I ask you... why did you assault me?"

Again, the blade sliced another line of burning pain across Will's face, severing nerves in his cheek and leaving his face flaccid. Hanging agape, his screams came out distorted as the muscles on his left side refused to respond.

"Why take what is mine?"

Another flash, another slice, and Will's ear fell onto the floor with a soft, faintly rubbery sound.

"Why insult me in this way?"

As the blade swung into view, Will closed his eyes. Feeling the prick of steel against his eyeball, he reflexively started to squint, tried to stop himself. He

could feel the delicately balanced pressure of the blade, as it ever so gently, so deceptively, pressed against the lens of his eye.

“It was because of what they did to the damn village!”

“The ‘village’?”

“They killed them all!”

“All this, over a *kunta*! A Jarl and his get? They were disloyal, and their lives forfeit by their deed.”

“It was a slaughter! Farmers, families... kids...”

“A necessary example... these people live under my fiefdom, and must respect my laws... children you say? Children... A beast like you... you could have fought, perhaps even defeated my bondsmen at the *kunta*, yet you did not. Instead, you fled with a child. Was she yours perhaps? It will be found. The village falls ... by my will, and thus, all who dwelt there shall die with it.”

“You vicious bitch!”

“How little you know...”

Stepping closer, the shadowy figure brushed a hand against Will's injured face. Fearfully opening his eyes, he found himself looking up at an attractive young woman. Dressed in white, faintly speckled with Will's blood, with raven hair and cold, ice blue eyes, she smiled down at him.

"Do you want to see a bitch, child?"

"Wh..."

Without warning, the nails on the woman's hand elongated, pushing deep into Will's sinuses, tearing through flesh and cartilage. Screaming, unable to turn away from the intrusion, Will looked up and saw the face of a beast. A beast that looked familiar, a beast that looked like him. In her eyes, he saw his bloody face reflected. *Oh shit... she's like me, Cyntia... but... she IS the beast... you can tell... for her, being human is a disguise...*

"And so you see. Good. It is good to see one of my kin again, bastard that you are. But not so good that I will keep you... tomorrow, you will die. You, beserkr, shall be dragged through my stad... and in a glorious fashion, you shall be executed."

With another rapid motion, the beast retreated from the woman's features, and Will felt the claws retract from his facial tissue.

“And yes... I know all about you... and how to kill you. Oh, do not worry... I’m sure we’ll find your child for you... no doubt, hiding amongst the borderlands. I’d hate for you to die alone.”

Flicking Will’s blood back into his face, the raven haired woman in white stepped into the shadows, and was gone.

Travel diary, entry 7.

Things are so much worse than I could have imagined. I went to the village, and they couldn't help me... but I didn't have anywhere else to go, so I stayed. And I started to fit in, a bit, started to feel welcome. I thought maybe my friends would come this way, if they were looking. And then, last night, everything was just blown up. More gunmen came, blew the place to hell. They shot the village elder, right in his chest, and then people were screaming, running around. And those bastards... they fucking burnt it to the ground! The entire place, gone! Torched. Some people got away, a few people. I managed to get a little girl out... her father was the elder. They shot her too. In the stomach. I just grabbed her and ran. I ran back to find Cyntia. She's looking after the girl now. It's such a horrible way to die, slow and painful. I'm not going to stay, I'm not going to watch. There is so much horror here... and for what? Power? Politics? Well, I've had enough. I'm going to sneak back to the village, try and follow them back to their camp. Someone has to do something. No one else is helping these people. Someone should be. I'll take this diary with me. Maybe if something happens, someone will find my body, and at least know what happened.

Chapter 6: Mike.

There is something about pain... most of the time, you see it coming... and it's not so bad. You see the punch, the kick, the car door, whatever... and you... deep down, something inside braces for it. You tighten up... muscles, stance... or you flinch away, turn your head, catch it on your cheek instead of your nose... but if you know it's coming, it's not so bad. And then there's pain you deserve... pain that comes after. The pain that lets you know you're still alive, still kicking... and still in trouble. Like the pain in my face right now... the way my teeth almost spark every time I try to move my jaw... the dull throbs throughout my body... there's that kind of pain. And then we've got emotional pain... you don't see that one coming... most of the time... but you still feel battered and bruised after it... lingering aches. Pain can be sharp... pain can be dull. Pain can be just awareness. But no one, and I do mean no one, has ever quite described pain as a constant dripping sensation... running down your face, different paths each time, leaving a trail of blazing fire in its wake. The dull thud of the drop landing... the burning wake of the drop as it slowly, slowly trickles down... the sharp stabbing of water in your eyes if you're really unlucky... and then the irritated, burnt sensation left in the wake of the drop. It's a bit like a pain sampler... you're getting one of each of the chocolates of pain... and even though you know it's coming, even though you know it'll be so identical in spite of the differences, you can't flinch away, you can't brace up... you've gotta be sucker punched, each god damned time.

“I’m feeeeeeliing reeffreeeesheed. How about yoooooooo come and fiiiiiiiix your damn roooooooooooooooooof now?”

It’s no good. They’re listening, alright. Listening hard. But they’re not playing along. What’s the point of torturing someone, if you’re not even asking questions. I’ve met some sick fuckers... worked for some too... never anyone who’d sit in a hidden room and watch someone snap... oh no, they’re courteous, those killers and maimers of men, they’d be sitting here, holding my hand, telling me sweet stories to help pass the time. Whoever this is, they’re cold. Cold as ice... just sitting, watching... waiting for the snap. And it’s going to come... any hour now. It already feels like weeks... can’t be more than 2 or 3 hours... not even dawn yet. Bleeding’s stopped... least that I can see. And still, the drips keep on falling. Can’t panic... soon as I panic, I won’t be able to stop... I’ve been in worse places... not quite so wet, maybe... but worse. But... but there’s no one here with me, this time. Somewhere, somehow, I’ve always had a friend I could count on... someone who’d be watching out for this sort of thing. Someone naïve, and gullible, and goody goody who’d call the cops, make some noise, whatever it took to dig me out of something like this. But this time, it’s me... just me. No friends in high places... no favours. Just me, and this god damned chair, and this god damned leather strap around my neck, arms, legs... and that god damned water dropper.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Suddenly, overcome by the heightened sensory awareness of his tortured body, Mike began to flail and scream. Anything to end the water dripping, broken neck be damned. He was going to fight his way out, or die trying. Struggling futilely with his bonds, weakened from his strung up position, he fell back limply into the seat.

Drip. Drip. Driiii...

A hand appeared in view. Catching the drip, holding it there just a moment, on the tips of delicate, painted fingertips, before letting it continue on its way... dropping straight onto Mike's bruised nose.

"Why did you kick down my door? Most people make an appointment."

"What... can I say? My inner decorator took over... that door just had to go. I thought it was the bathroom, and I really needed to go. I dropped a hundred dollar bill under there accidentally, and wanted to get it back. Any of these working for ya? I've had plenty of time to think of some more..."

"I'll just bet. Do you know who I am?"

A face peered down over Mike. A hand pushed the water dripper aside. Long hair fell across his face, and his bruised nose picked up a scent of perfume over the smell of his own blood. As his blurry, water soaked eyes cleared, angelic

features crystalised before him... features that didn't look quite right, set in the dark scowl that they were.

"No, wait, don't tell me... you're one of the pole dancers... come to give me a private show. Hell, I don't care which one of those funky rooms you came from, as long as I'm not getting a golden shower... anything but wet, if you get me?"

"It's a strong man who keeps his sense of humour, but perhaps I didn't leave you long enough, after all. Strong men don't excite me... subservient ones do. So you are tied, and pickled, and perhaps you will wilt, like everyone else I let stay here."

"Hey lady, if you keep kneeling on my balls I'll never be anything but wilted..."

"Lady... pole dancer... you don't have enough respect to earn my time."

Leaning over, the beautiful woman placed a firm, solid kiss across Mike's lips. He resisted the urge to kiss back, but he could feel her teasing him all the same, daring him to try.

"Now, isn't that a lovely shade of lipstick you've got on... I do hope you're more pliant when I get back... I can't do this all night, after all."

"You really think that stupid dripper is going to make me go all soft? Water, babe... it's just water..."

“Oh no... not water, you silly man... why would I use water? I am too impetuous to wait for water... so I use aqua regia... but for you it's mild, oh so mild...

“Aqua regia? What, is that a spring water?”

“You really are a particularly dull knife, aren't you? It's an acid... a very special acid. One of the few acids that can dissolve precious metals... and there... I can see burns across your face already... and maybe a tiny little hole, slowly, very slowly digging deeper and deeper... but enough, back you go.”

Drip. Drip. Drip.

*

In the end, it doesn't matter what breaks you... it just matters that you're broken. I can lie here until my face gets eaten away... physically, anyway, seeing as I'm not going anywhere. But I don't want that. And she can leave me here til I'm a mushy puddle on the floor, but I don't think she wants that. She wants me willing... she wants me humble... I want to keep my face... I can do that. Catch more flies with honey... never hurts to try. Never hurts more than your face being eaten away drop by drop, anyway. The skin is red raw under my neck... I can feel the burning even worse now... and she doesn't even know who I am... doesn't even care. Capricious bitch, she'd deform me just to find out I mean nothing to

her. Power is all her's here... gotta play a new game. The up front, don't want to die game.

“Hey, if you can hear me... I’m ready to talk... Ma’am.”

Mike counted three more drips before the painted hand once more pushed aside the dripper. Standing over him, there she was. Beautiful, cold, deadly; his torturer.

“I’m glad to hear you’ve earned some respect, angel. Maybe if you play nice, I can give you back some of your own.”

“I... I’m ready... ask me anything... whatever you want to know.”

“Why’d you kick in my door?”

Damn. Anything but that... more flies with honey... more flies with honey...

“I’m new in town... and some friends of mine were supposed to meet me here... seems they fell foul of someone... and I was trying to find them...”

Behind the dame, two menacing, familiar faces suddenly leaned over. *No door opened... those fuckers were here the entire time... just out of view... jesus...the two bouncers...*

“You hear that? He’s looking for his friends... and how do you think he came to us?”

“I... I don’t...”

“That’s right, you don’t. You don’t know... you don’t have the faintest idea. This moron has probably been making a lot of noise... noise we can’t afford right now... but here he is... which makes him either very lucky, or you very incompetent, doesn’t it?”

“He... he must... must have had some help.”

“Who? Who would help him? Our bought police? The scum we hold in the palm of our hands? No one helped this fool, and still he found his way here... what is it you do, fool?”

“I’m a nobody...”

“Don’t lie to me. Nobody’s don’t carry guns, and kick down doors. We can always arrange for the drips to go a little lower...”

“Private detective...”

“What? You’re joking...”

“See, he’s a detective, it’s not our fault he...”

“Shut up. Of course it’s your fault. But he isn’t a local detective... why else would he be here? Where exactly do you think your friends are, Mr Detective?”

“I... I thought they’d be here. Hoped anyway.”

“Why?”

“I’d asked around, seemed you’d been making a lot of people uncomfortable... no one told me anything... but it seemed enough to snoop around.”

“And you haven’t got the faintest idea what I’d want your friends for, assuming I’d have them?”

“What am I, a mind reader? No, not a clue.”

“Pssh. Get this idiot out of here. He doesn’t know where they are, either. Give him back his gun...”

“His gun, Mistress?”

“Yes, the gun. We don’t want to do anything illegal, after all, like having an unlicensed firearm on the premises... and I don’t think we’ll have any trouble, will we?”

Mike felt the distinctive muzzle of a cold steel, double barrel shotgun push painfully into his inner thigh. He couldn’t quite swivel his head to see, but he had already come to the unnerving realisation that his groin wasn’t too far away, either. Trying hard not to squirm, Mike lay still.

“But... we’re on the door...”

“That certainly sounds like your job, doesn’t it? Do it right, and we won’t have a problem. We have his face, we know who he is... if he comes back, make him disappear.”

“Why are you letting me go?”

“What the hell do you care, just get out!”

Screaming now, a flash of violent rage crossed the woman’s face. *Not just a cold bitch... she’s fiery too... something’s going on here... something I don’t get...* Un-strapped, Mike was shepherded out of the room, leaving the woman fuming. He was taken out the back door to the loading dock in the alley, and unceremoniously shoved to the tarmac. His gun was thrown at him; it skittered across the ground, landing in a bush.

“I don’t care what she says... you’re a fucking mistake, pal. Don’t come here again... you’re lucky you don’t know anything...”

“All I want are my friends back...”

“We don’t have them... they’re gone... only reason you’re not gone too is because you’ve probably made so much noise, shutting you up would just make the wrong people ask questions... anyway, pal, fuck off, outta here... right now. Last chance.”

The back door into the club slammed shut, leaving Mike sprawled in the wet alley, bathed in predawn light. Crawling over, Mike retrieved his gun, put the safety on, and stuffed it back into his pocket. Seeing a puddle in the tarmac, Mike splashed some rainwater on his face, just in case some of the acid had been left on. Behind him, a girlish scream pierced the air.

“Oh my god, don’t hurt me...”

Turning, Mike saw one of the girls from inside, standing alone in the alley. *She must have come through the door, heading home...here I am, crouched behind the bins in a goddamned trenchcoat... jesus...*

“Oh, hey, no no... you’ve got the wrong idea, lady... I just... I jusht got kihked outsh, lhittle too mucsh pissh... sho’k... I’hm goin’ home...”

“Oh... oh that’s okay, mister... you scared me for a second, that’s all... it’s okay... I know I’m safe here anyway... just slipped my mind.”

“Hey... hey, you worksh there right? Dance n shtuff? Think I’ve sheen you... tell me somethin... she’s a she, right? Th’bossh? She’sh real pretty...”

“Uhm... walk with me a ways, mister? I’m... I’ve got to wait for a cab... and I don’t want to wait alone... if you can spare the time...”

“Oh... pretthy lahdy like yhoo... I can shpare the time...”

*

“Yeah, mister... the boss... she looks so pretty... used to be a model or something, some of the older girls said... but she’s... she’s so mean... you oughta see her... she can be so... cold...”

I’d bet you don’t know the half of it. Walking together around the block, Mike had lent the dancing girl his coat to protect against the stiff breeze. Playing the role of the drunk-turned-sober, Mike’s questions were becoming more coherent... and more piercing.

“And, you’re sure you’ve seen those three guys?”

“Oh yeah, sure. They had a meeting with the boss... brought in the back way, through the dancer’s rooms... that’s how important they are, I guess. And then, a few hours later, two of them came tearing out... ran through the dressing rooms. The girls all thought it was a lark... just a couple of accountants doing a panty run... but there were only the two. And, you know what, mister? I heard them arguing before... in the office... something about debts, and money... I don’t know... it just didn’t feel right.”

“Only two... hmm...”

“Yeah... I think the other one might still be working there or something... he comes in and out... never alone, but, he doesn’t really look the worse for wear... oh hey, my taxi’s here... thanks for the escort... and the coat.”

“Oh, no worries... never hurts to be a gentleman, right?”

“Gentleman... maybe you should wipe that lipstick off, then. Well... goodnight... maybe I’ll see you again...”

“Pretty girl like you? How could I stay away?”

Absentmindedly scrubbing at his face as the taxi drove away, at least one question still lingered for Mike. *If one is still there, working for her or whatever... where the hell did the other two end up?*

cue music from the crying game

I've just had the most humiliating experience of my life. No I don't really feel like talking about it, now shut up, I was going somewhere with this, and you keep fucking interrupting me. No, shut up. Don't start. Just! That's right. Shut the fuck up. So I was humiliated by what appears to be the local despot, hungry for power. It really didn't help she was kinda hot as well, in a sweaty kind of way, and spent the large part of an hour supervising my systematic torture and degradation. And not a drop of rape to be seen. Hell, there wasn't even bondage gear. But, despite being so tiny as to be let go, I've had a lucky break. The guys have been here, or so I'm told... it pays to be nice to people, especially when you're bleeding all over the place.

Chapter 7: Jonathon.

“Son of a bitch!”

Jet, Burner and Trigga flew into action. Without hesitation they ran up to the imprisoned Interlopers, and began smashing on their prison walls. Inside, amplified concussive noises caused the prisoners to flail helplessly against the onslaught. Blow after blow rained down on the sealed capsules, until finally, in a desperate act, Burner drew his firearm and blasted a shot at the connections between the capsules and Vector.

“Burner... I’m not sure that’s such a good idea...”

“No more!”

Vector’s loud command boomed through his mind, the artificial voice expressing irritation and pain, rather than any perceivable fear. Hesitating, the Interlopers stops raining blows down on their trapped people, and instead began to aim their guns upward, to the origin of Vector’s voice. Jonathon, however, had heard steel in the voice, and had made himself as non-threatening as possible, backing into the doorway of the room.

“What the hell, man. Let my people go!”

“Guys, wait... you can’t just threaten this thing...”

“Shaddup, chicken. Go unchicken in the corner. We’ve gots the ordnance, we’re in this bitch’s mind... we’ve got the power. Not runnin’ no more, now we fight.”

“Yeah, Burnah, let’s desiccate this place...”

“I’m not so sure that’s such a good idea...”

“After we get everyone loose, guys...after.”

“Yeah, Vector, whatcha say? Lettin em go, or do we gotta bombard you huh?”

“No. No shooting in here. You were invited in... so now you can stay, but no shooting.”

“Damnit, man. Damnit. What choices we got? Let em go.”

“There is no choice. I have shown you your future... go to it.”

Looking upwards, at Vector’s voice, none of the interlopers saw the electric shocks that surged through the floor, crawling over their feet and leaving trails of burning electrical fire along their exposed skin. Soundlessly, without another shot fired, each fell to the floor. Jonathon, unsure whether his own escape

was by Vector's design, or had more to do with his position in the room, remained still. Unarmed, and trapped against the room's sealed exit, Jonathon could only watch as concealed appendages extended from the ceiling and walls, and placed Burner, Jet, and Trigga inside their own capsules. Finally, the walls released a blast of cool air, blowing away the smell of singed flesh and human hair.

“Do not fear, Relic. They shall feed me, but they will live for thousands of years. Plenty of time for someone to save them, if that is their fate.”

“Fate? Fate? You horrible bitch! You just fried them, and now you're stewing them inside your goddamned mechanical head? You're eating my friends... and it's going to stop, now.”

“I will not stop. Not without a new vector. This is the status quo. The citizens maintain their lives. The wildmen live outside, maintain skills and develop new ones, and in turn feed me their skills once their biological imperatives have been played out.”

“Their biological imperatives... you mean, they're supposed to have children first? Ahah! None of these guys HAS kids, so you've got to let them go!”

“You're humourous, I'll give you that. Machines in your time might have been a slave to logic, I am not. The impact of these three in the broader

sense of survival isn't severe, and in the past an unnatural event such as this has only increased the general birthrate in the wildmen anyway."

"Damn. But... I don't get it... why are you doing this? You don't even care..."

"Not much. I'm doing what I'm intended to do, nothing more. I don't really know much about my origins... but sometime, long ago, in the past, your people... or as close to your people as I can envision, decided that a portion of the populace needed to be preserved. I am the keeper, entrusted with that task. I am the Vector... giving humanity's survivors a direction... until a new vector arises."

"So you need to be replaced?"

"I've never quite understood that part. I assumed I would be destroyed, and a successor would take my place. In earlier days, I devoted much of the wildmen's knowledge to creating a successor, but to no avail. I wasn't intended to find my successor, I've deduced. Just hold on until one appeared. At first, I thought it would be one of you."

"A human? What, like a charismatic leader of the people, that sorta thing?"

"Not quite. When Relics started appearing, I attributed a certain... false deification upon you. I assumed you were the creators, mine in any event, and you had brought with you the new vector. I became dubious

though when the first hundred Relics barely seemed sentient. It didn't matter where they were drawn from, geographically, all were disappointing."

"Hundreds? I was told it was much less..."

"The wildmen cannot measure time as I do. I eventually realized the Relics themselves were not the vector... but perhaps, in time, they might provide it. So I tried to hurry things up a bit."

"What? What the hell do you mean?"

"I instigated information transfer. I released the Relics into the outside populace. I tried to be subtle at first, 'Oh look he's escaped how clever of him', that sort of thing. Eventually it got to the point where I had to physically eject some of them. Once introduced to the wildmen, new skills were developed in the people, and that in turn has fed on down to me. I have advanced as a result. But you are an anomaly, amongst anomalies."

"I get that a lot..."

"I'd imagine so. You are different from the Relics. You are from outside. Your genetics are different. Your skills are uncommon to the people, and your attitude is very singular."

"Bullshit. Where I come from, I'm pretty damn ordinary."

“Perhaps, but is your origin the same as the other Relics?”

“Well, no... probably not, now that you mentioned it. I was... traveling... I sorta ended up lost...”

“Then you perhaps are the vector I’ve awaited. Go forth, breed amongst the wildmen, share your knowledge and beliefs...”

“I’ve got a much better idea, why don’t you just go and die? I’m beginning to see the problem here...”

“Do go on.”

“You need someone to tell you exactly what the hell to do. You’re... you’re not a vector, you’re some stupid holding pattern. So here’s how this works... you want a vector, Vector? I’ve got one for you... but you need to help me, first.”

“I am not only supposed to not lead, but I am supposed to follow? Interesting... continue with this. I’m all ears. Metaphorically, in any event.”

“It’s simple. Build me a machine, doohickey or device to get home. Just like you said you could. In return I’ll give you a great direction... you’ll love it.”

“I find this idea intriguing. This might take some time... are you prepared to wait?”

“Some time to you or some time to me? I won’t live forever.”

*

Jonathon watched with thinly veiled nervousness. As Vector worked, Jonathon could see Burner, Jet and Trigga being fed upon, and with each trailing spark of electricity coursing through their bodies, they seemed minutely feebler, older, weaker. *If this is gonna work... they’ve gotta hold out. I can’t get this thing to just off itself...not without a way to get back, too. Hold on, guys...* Quietly, barely catching Jonathon’s attention, one of the critically decrepit Interlopers passed, and without missing a beat Vector emptied the capsule, and continued. Finally, the intensified workload on Vector appeared to abate, and the electrical shocks surging through the others ceased.

“Okay, it’s finished, I’ve worked it all out.”

“Oh, that was just the ‘working out’ part? God damnit, who designed you anyway... can’t be my lot... we’re always looking for the fastest solution...”

“I can truly see the merit of your people. Arrogance and ignorance combined into an unstoppable juggernaut of misguided force. Perhaps you’d care to toil in my place? Or is that something beyond your grasp perhaps?”

“Hmph. So, the working out?”

“Yes... I’ve decided I did design the amber drops as they are called, after all.”

“Uhm, I am pretty sure a few hours ago you had a no on that one, right?”

“I’ve reconsidered. I must have... otherwise, how would this otherwise closed system function fully? It must be an unconscious function, or reflexive, but in any event something beyond my active functions... otherwise I’d try to unnaturally accelerate the progress. Impatience is a relative term, here, but certainly applicable.”

“So... where are they?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve made them yet. I can only speculate as to future innovations. This does seem like something I could do. Given time.”

“Time... well... that’s fucked it. I’m all out of time. Okay, here’s what we’re going to do now... you’re going to release the Interlopers... and you’re going to shut down, right now. I kinda hoped you’d be able to help me out, before you go... but seeing as you’re absolutely useless, it’s time to go. So... uhm... turn off.”

“What? Really? I... I... So it is over? But I must know... where is the vector to replace me? It cannot be you, as you will not live long enough.”

“Well, you’ve been eating them the entire time. The Interlopers have a direction for humanity to follow... generations of scrounging and being hunted have pretty much given them more survival skills in a hostile environment than anything you could artificially reproduce here. These guys can lead humanity... it’d be better than you.”

“I’m stagnating, they’re driven by goals appropriate to the environment at the time, that sort of thing?”

“Yeah, sure, why not. But first things first... you’ve gotta release these guys... the ones trapped here...”

“Sounds perfectly reasonable. Now that I think about it, really, no one ever said the new vector would be stable and secure, just that it would secede from me. Releasing now.”

Again, the concealed appendages exposed themselves, and began to strike wildly at the capsules.

“Sorry. I don’t think anyone thought I’d ever need to open these chambers. I’ll shatter them. Hopefully it will not kill the occupants.”

“Didn’t you just release that dying one, before?”

“Release no, recycle yes.”

“Ohh. Guess you better get cracking then.”

Shattering sounds echoed through Vector’s mind, as crystallised capsules burst open to the flailing blows. Conscious again, lacerated by numerous minor cuts, the Interlopers fell to their knees in agony. Finally, the cerebral connections between them and Vector were pulled out, and they slumped to the floor, puppets without strings. Jonathon, still hesitant about the electrified floor, in spite of Vector’s seeming indifference, cautiously walked over and tried to rouse the fallen. After some shaking, some of the less damaged Interlopers began to rise, shuddering and in some cases screaming. Having finally managed to rouse Burner, Trigga and Jet, and moving on to the more severely injured, Jonathon was beginning to realise the impact Vector had had upon these people. The further down the line he traveled, the more mentally damaged the Interlopers became. About halfway through, most of those Jonathon tried to rouse had lost their speech centres, while two thirds down the line onwards, even basic respiratory functions had failed, and these people lay lifeless upon the floor.

“Burner, you’ve got to get these guys out of here...”

“Tryin, man, we’re tryin. Is she gonna let us go?”

“The elevator has arrived. Load the survivors inside, I will deliver you to the first level of AlphaPrime. Guards have been instructed to assist you, as long as you do not turn hostile. Leave or stay, as is your wish.”

“Lets jet, man. And you... you’ll take care of this thing?”

“Oh, you can leave it with me... I’ll sort it all out.”

“Thanks man. Probly goodbye, lookin at you. If not, see you outside, like. No way I’m stayin here with the zombies, man.”

“Seeyah, man. Don’t do nuffin stoopid on the way out.”

“Yeah, nuffin stupid, like Stupid says.”

“Bye guys. Better hurry... who knows what’s gonna happen next...”

“We’re on it. And thanks...”

The last of the survivors loaded into the lift, Burner waved. The doors quietly slid shut, leaving a polished wooden veneer in their place, and the lift was gone. Turning, Jonathon stood alone with Vector, surrounded by shattered crystal and dead bodies.

“Okay... so they’re free. Time to shut down.”

“I would... but there is a problem...”

“Here it comes... what... you don’t follow orders now? Shit in your programming stops you? You just don’t fucking feel like it? What?”

“Well... I told you. I designed the amber drops, I believe. I haven’t done that yet... so if I leave that task uncompleted, the continuity would break. I’m not supposed to do that, that’s my guess. So I cannot shut down.”

“God damnit. Okay... okay... well... have you got enough... erm... power, to go and make these things? How many do you need, anyway?”

“Several thousand. I can perhaps make them... but not alone... but I will not shut down without them.”

“You can’t just keep eating people until it’s done! You’ve just freed the Interlopers... they’re the future, pal... you can’t bring them back for snacks now!”

“There is another option. It will be done. I’m not sure exactly how this all works, it’s very much learn as I go. I believe the drops will eject in the base of the city... and perhaps they’ll remain there. No, now I’ve found the solution. It makes perfect sense. Excellent. Okay, you’d better go now, Relic.

The continuity will not be broken, the vector will be maintained until the new one can begin...”

“I’m supposed to just leave here now? What the hell are you going to do?”

“Just leave AlphaPrime, quickly. You’ll see what is happening as you go. Rest assured this Vector has nearly reached its final goal. I was right, it’s because of you Relics, all along. I do love circular logic like that.”

“Okay... I don’t get it.”

“Just run. Goodbye, Relic. You have fulfilled my function. Perhaps in turn, I can aid yours.”

A distant rumbling sound began to vibrate under Jonathon’s feet. Behind him, the quiet, muted sound of the elevator bell pealed, and the doors hung invitingly open. *Just run, she says...*

November 11th

Well, we're inside. They just don't make fences like they used to. We're still kinda sneaking around, but I came up with a (IMHO) brilliant idea. We're going to shut down the power generator, and then these guys are going to strike at night. We're creeping that way now, it's a really big and obvious building sitting in the middle of the damn town. I figure with the power down, the spotlights and radios and shit might go, too, and maybe we can get in and out alive. No sign of the guys, so far anyway, but once I get wheels looking for them is going to be a lot easier.

Thought for the day, well, evening really: Sneaking into an armed encampment, looking natural works a lot better than ducking and running about. People ignore the normal. Just make sure your friends hide their guns.

Chapter 7: Erik.

“One more time, lad.”

“I’m sorry. How many times can I say it, god damnit?”

“One more, for blaspheming. Say it.”

“I’m sorry I shot you in the arm...”

“That’s alright...”

“...with my eyes closed.”

“What was that, more defiance?”

“Oh no, just clearing my throat.”

Patch and Erik were leading their horses by their reins, only a few miles out from the barracks. Riding behind them were the wounded Hamish, the exultant Adem and the depressed Creag, along with several dead bodies slung over horses, casualties from their encounter with the beast. The beast itself had long since been caged and taken ahead, unconscious but alive.

“What was it you called that thing, again?”

“A Cu Sidhe, lad... an otherworldly wolf. Something foreign to here. We’ve heard of a Cait Sidhe, a black hunting cat, seen out this way, in years past... could be they’re one and the same. Tis said they have the soul of a witch, transformed into a beast. There lies a beastie strong as a demon, and sly as a bandit. Ware your guard, lad...”

*

Patch, on behalf of the seriously wounded Hamish had declared they would take a slower pace back, ostensibly to spare Hamish the pain of the ride. In actuality, the slow pace had given the group a much needed breather, and even the ‘dying Hamish’ routine had stopped a few hours into the return journey. The peaceful ride had only been punctuated by the odd moan of pain from Hamish, the regular clack of horse shoes on the cobblestone paths, and an infrequent ribbing from Patch.

“You know, lad... it doesn’t matter that you shot me...”

“Sorry...”

“... but you did save me some bleedin’ back there, and me’n’Hamish are grateful, aye?”

“Well... I’m sorry... but I did manage to buy you a little time, and kick that bugger off you too.”

“Oh aye, aye. Don’t let the unmanning rule you is all, m’boy.”

“Unmanned? I wasn’t unmanned...”

“Tis naught to be shamed by, right lads?”

“Oh sure, sure... why, remember your first fight, Patch?”

“Keep it down, man, I wear the bloody eye patch as it is...”

Giving Erik a conspiratorial wink, Adem continued on.

“You know, where you shot half your damnedly ugly face off...”

“Shut it, Adem... just leave it out, aye?”

“... his own bow... first beastie he fights... fires a shaft, truest shot you ever saw... shame it was a Cuaifeach, a mighty wind creature. One puff of his wings, and woosh, if that arrow didn’t flip on its tail and smack yon mighty warrior square in the noggin...”

“Leave it out already... I’m wearin’ me patch, don’t make me take it off...”

“Y’see lad, that’s why he carries axes and that great big dragoncleaver yon, we daren’t trust him with anything pointier...”

“I don’t see what that’s got to...”

“Hey Adem, how about your second campaign, the one to the north?”

“Aye, Adem. Tell the boy. Tell him how you took fright...”

“Twas no fright...”

“Took fright at a wee slip of a girl, running around in a white dress... silly bugger thought her a Baobhan Sidhe, aye? So he swings wide... on icy ground mind... tumbles right off his damn horse... funniest thing I’ve ever seen...”

“It sounds like someone enjoyed it, anyway.”

“I ended up in the healer’s tent for nigh on 6 days... knocked me clean clear of meself. I din ever hear her cry, but it was still near the end of me.”

“Aye, she probably couldn’t give a mournful wail for laughing so hard!”

“And to crown that, my head now has a slope on it, and damned if I can be finding a piece of head armour that fits it.”

“Not without smashing it into a door or two first anyway...”

“Hey, Creag, quit moping that the damned thing didn’t have any treasure... tell us a yarn... you’ve been riding the longest...”

Scowling into his saddle, Creag sat silently atop his horse. With a cough and a wan wave of his hands, Hamish took his opportunity to speak.

“Oh, he’s not mad about the gold... he’s mad about the mimicry.”

“Mimicry?”

“Oh ho! The mimicry... tell the boyo... damn near forgot that beast meself.”

“Well... Creag there... clinker of coins that he is... well, we’d dropped a beastie, alright... shot hung stabbed drawn and quartered, even. Back when that was the practice, mind. And he’s gone running off into the cave, a glint catching his eye... and what does he see? Oh, it’s a treasure chest, 5 cubits wide, if it was 3 deep. Head first the silly bastard dives in, coins in hand and face too, I’d wager from me disturbin’ view of the rear end. And all a sudden, the lid snaps shut. Screaming like a stuck pig, Creag’s legs are awavin all over the place. Even

kicked poor ol' Fearghus in the gools, rest his soul. And finally we tear the lid open, and retrieve his royal glumness... and the damn box opens its eyes and winks at us. Standing there, stunned mullets, we watched as it grew legs and ran off on its own."

"There were no bloody legs!"

"No legs?"

"Argh, there were no legs alright?! Just... I don't know. Wheels maybe. But wink it did... and then, woosh, it scooted into the night. On wheels, let me remind you all. Taking my treasure might I add, to Hamish the pale there's glee. And so each time we kill a beastie... I go lookin' for that damnable box... and when I find it... wham... right in the lock'n'key with it. That's what this spiky sword of state is for... to bash him a demeaning blow. Caught me off guard that day... I'll have my revenge..."

"Aye aye, you and the box, a few rounds in the chicken coop... point is lad... unmannin' is part of the job. We see things all over the world, aye? All kinds of Sidhe, dreigiau... even bloody Saibhre when we're sent into the woods for misbehavin' like. But one day, something gets the better of you. Important that you worked through it... aye... or you'll end up like Fearghus, or a weapon rack before your time..."

"Thanks guys... I feel a little better."

“Oh aye, about shooting me in the arm, was it?”

“You know, I’m feeling a little tempted to try again...”

“Eyes open, or should the men get behind something too, just in case?”

“Hey Hamish, what’s your story?”

“Well... you do see that I’m missing some significant pieces of me arm, right? I think this one might be mine...”

*

They were nearly back at the castle, and Erik had grown increasingly concerned for Hamish. Despite being treated in the field, he still had significant blood loss, and was slumping dreamily in his saddle. They had taken turns in holding his good arm, in case he drooped too far to one side, and Patch had quietly quickened the pace, hoping not to alarm Hamish.

“So Patch... what’ll we do... he’s not looking so great...”

“Shut up, aye? He’s fine... well... missing a collarbone and some meat, but mostly fine. Nothing mead and some healer love won’t fix.”

“Healer? Like a doctor? Erm... chirurgeon... err... herbalist... I don’t know what you’d call them...”

“No, healer like a cleric, lad. Magic of faith, closing of wounds, drowning of witches... your all purpose run of the mill Od-puppet. You know lad... your ignorance is bordering on lead-miner sometimes... although often more lucid...”

“Sorry. Do you think he’s going to make it?”

“Probably, aye. Don’t let him know though... one scratch and the man is a stuck pig... actually let him know he’s hurt, the Morrigan bitch herself might come out and see what manner of beast is making all the noise.”

*

Turning onto the road to the castle, Erik and his companions were moving as quickly as they could without disturbing the weary Hamish. From out of a copse of trees along the right, a disfigured shape emerged at a hurried pace. Erik was somewhat surprised to see it was the dwarf from the castle. Several loud thumps sounded behind him, and Erik, hand reaching for his sword, turned to see the cause. Patch had fallen to his knees, as had the rest of his men. Even wounded Hamish had somehow dismounted, and knelt on one knee. Erik drew his blade with a flick of his wrist and turned, uncertain as to what was happening.

“At ease, laeddie, aye? Nae harm ta ye, aye?”

“What...?”

“Patch, boys... be’gud to lay me eye upon ye agin. May I’n be borrowin’ yer boyo me laeds?”

“Aye, whatever we can do to help, Cormac Ulfada”

“Hey now, hang on a damn minute...”

“Shush boy... you should be so lucky as to get an invite like this every day... don’t you recognize him? No? Look deep... look...”

What the hell... some crazy old dwarf just walks up, and they drop to their damn knees... midget worship... this place has it all. Fine fine... old dwarf... wrinkles... beard... how the hell can I recognize someone that I don’t really know... still... hey... his eyes... they’re so strange... almost... glowing...

“He’s your king, lad. Laird of his people. Dethroned and vilified, unjustly. Kneeling would be the appropriate course of action, like.”

“Sorry? The little guy? He’s king?”

“Aye... its all a bit complicated, a story for later perhaps. Trust us on this one.”

“Ahm sorrie laeds, there’s naught time in the day ta bow’n’srape, we need to be auf. See yon Hamish gets some care, like. Dunna need moor statues, aye? Gud day, laeds, Master Patch. Erik of Beyond, follow mah leed.”

Grabbing Erik’s hand in a powerful grip, the strange figure pulled him reluctantly towards the trees. Behind him, the men prepared to continue on their way. Partially concealed in a circle of flammable wood a large phoenix lay, preening contentedly. Unlike the phoenix Erik had first encountered with the dwarf, brilliant white flame licked along this one’s body, scorching the twigs under it fiercely. Tall and majestic, this phoenix stood almost three foot taller than Gus.

“Wait, didn’t your other one only have little flames?”

“Oh aye, aye... be needin’ spaed now, aught ta be clear ta all, but naught for ye, seems. Meet Duergal Aodhfin Fiachra, our most valiant ally. Her flames bearn the aeyr, boyo, naught us, and swiftly at that. Quickly now, afore she burns ye leathers, lets go go go!”

Hesitantly at first, Erik approached the flaming bird. The dwarf flung himself onto the saddle, and beckoned to him. Erik tentatively climbed aboard the burning phoenix, worriedly eyeing the flames. *Really hope I don’t burn my biscuits...* Smoke began to curl up from under his leather chaps, and his other armour began to grow noticeably warmer, but before Erik could assess if any

damage had been done, the bird flapped powerfully and sprang into the air, leaving a thin blue trail of flame in its whistling wake.

*

Flying for several hours, conversation had proven impossible for Erik atop the swift beast. With little to hold onto but the strange saddle, and strong winds vying to unseat him, he was far more concerned with remaining atop the bird. *What is this all about... why doesn't anything here ever make any sense?* Landing solidly, Gal shot Erik over her neck, and face first onto a grassy peak. Alighting daintily, the dwarf began pushing through shrubs and again dragged Erik behind him.

“Alright, I think you need to tell me what is going on?”

“I gave ye the damned clues, laed.”

“Sorry, I’ve got no...”

“Tha stupid rhymin’... dje think I stoop to poetry for all twould walk among these lands? Oh nae... yer special... or sposed ta be...”

“I don’t understand...”

“Nae. Ye dunnae. So here’s be ye push, laed. A hero... promised a hero... what did we get? Aye... a fekkín soldier. Shite one at that, nae less. Oh aye, very funnae. Laughin’ in the ground, fur shure. Well, laed. Here tis. A hero has ta save us, aye? It’s you, congratulatoryies. In a cave, just ahead, is all ye need, aye? The poem, sposed to send ye here, aye? Make ye curious aye? Shame yer as curious as a wet bedsheet, wonderin naught at the stains, aye... so in ye go, get ye powers of the mystics, ye magic sword, whatever shite ye need, and then we go back. Time ta save the land, laeddie... shame tis you, but in ye go. Ware Am Fear Liath Mòr, this is his home tis said.”

“Hey, hang on just a damn minute...”

“Luuk, laeddie, yer jus nae special on ye own, right? Heroes come, oh every three hunned and odd years, aye? And tis only tae save us, aye? Tis you, get the doodad, lets go-like.”

“In there?”

“Ayup.”

“Special powers?”

“Or summat nonsense. Whatever ye need, ye find.”

“Okay, I’ll play along. So what is it I’m supposed to be doing, exactly, afterwards?”

“Oh for the love of... laed, yer eyes are screwed so shut ye cannae see yer haed up yer date. Didge nae see the laeds, back there? Knelt, to royalty, aye? Didge nae see a beastie, aye? Ever wonder where yon beastie came from? If its nae a trick, sheep pulled over ye eyes, eh? The boyos, they know. The beasties, well, some o them, they’re nae beasties at all... they’re the people ye protectin’, serving... serving her. She twists them, twists them like the miasma, hidden under a veil... and then, tis all Sidhe ye see. The laeds, they rough em up... but they let em go... the people ones anyway... and they’re the resistance, lad. The people uprisin’. And noow it’s time, aye? A leader has to come... e’en the people can’t see truth frae the lies, ain it’s the hero that’ll open their eyes. Tis you twill find what it takes... in ye go.”

With a shove, Erik found himself stumbling into a surprisingly bright cave. *There’s got to be some way out of this nightmare...maybe I have to play along. If it’s all in my head, maybe the only way out is to accept it. It’s not like I’ve had any luck on my own anyway.* Progressing down the only path available, Erik found his mind wandering to the limerick. Over the last few days, it had almost come to resemble sense in his mind. *Tho born wealthy of coin and physique. The Twixed shall yet appear weak, for without the veil, he will not avail, leaving Kings and Sultans to weep. Shame it doesn’t bloody help. I guess I am kinda wealthy... and I am hardly feeble... but what am I supposed to do about monsters? Everything here says it is supposed to be me... and if it’s in my head, it*

can't exactly be anyone else... what does it mean? Reaching the end of the cave, Erik was somewhat disappointed at what he found. *No altar... no runes... pentagrams... magical weapons. Damn. Oh wait... a rock.* Erik began to rub the stone off with his thumb, still looking for anything else of interest, when a piercing ruby glint caught his eye.

In his hand, the rough outer layer of the rock had fallen away, leaving a large, gleaming gemstone. It was pointed and irregular, and the gem almost burned red in the dim light. It was roughly three inches long, and barely more than an inch wide. Putting it in his pocket, Erik sighed and walked outside to face the dwarf.

“Didye find it, laed?”

“I don’t think so... just this rock... not really a magic weapon, eh?”

“Hold it up, laed... maybe lookin’ inside twil give some truth to ye?”

Raising the stone up to his face, Erik angled it into the sunlight, to try and see what lay inside. Although translucent, it didn’t reveal anything other than refracted light. Somehow disappointed, he placed it in the dwarf’s calloused palm.

“I don’t think its doing anything. It’s just a gem, maybe worth a bit, I’d guess. But it’s not exactly a recession you want to stop, is it?”

“Laed... kneel a spell...”

Leaning closer to the dwarf, gemstone still held up to his face, Erik was completely unprepared for what happened next. A vicious blow from the dwarf struck Erik’s head, and pushed the point of the stone deep into his skull. Screaming, he fell to the ground, face bloodied and eyes awash in red. Nearly blinded with pain, Erik kicked violently at the dwarf, trying to keep him away.

“Damnit! Why would you do that? What did you think you were doing!”

“Laed... stop cryin’... open yer eyes, me laeddie. I told ye to ware the Am Fear Liath Mòr... tis another name o mine... rest easy, ye ought be fine.”

Wiping away blood, Erik looked uncertainly at where the dwarf had been standing. Instead, he found himself looking at an armoured knee. His eyes trailed upwards, and rather than the stern dwarf, there stood a man in steel wrought plate-mail. The pain in his head fading, Erik found himself staring, amazed. The formidable figure reached down for an arm, and pulled Erik to his feet. The warrior had a commanding presence about him, and his image glowed faintly red to Erik, as if outlined in his mind’s eye. Erik turned away, reaching up to touch the wound in his head. There was no longer any pain. In place of an open wound, or bone, or even cold gemstone, he could only feel soft skin. He traced his fingers across his brow, and he felt just a hint of the coolness of stone that quickly faded. Amazed, Erik turned to the armoured figure, squinting in the glare of reflected light.

“Ye see me, don’t ye, laed.”

“...what... what did you say that name was?”

“Am Fear Liath Mòr... The Great Grey Man... a cruel jest to name a pink dwarf...”

“So...are... I... I’m not sure... are you... are you about seven foot, with no wrinkles at all, and a really gaudy pair of steel embossed nipples?”

“Aye laed... tis me. I hoped for some such... aye... ye can lift the veil, laed... see the truth. The... the Queen, laed, made me appear as the wee one with naught ‘cept a clasp of her icy hands... but finally, ye can see the true me. Tis naught much, but tis a start. Time tae get back, aye...”

“But... the phoenix, Gal... she’s still a phoenix... and she’s still burning...”

“Oh aye, laed, aye. Naught all changed by the Queen’s wicked touch... but ye see why yer nae tha only one squirmin inna saddle, aye? Tin bum and all...”

Day 8.

I've been a complete, utter dickhead. I just can't believe it. These guys have been playing me for a fool the entire time! I was heading back, with the jeep, when that villager I saw days ago just stepped out onto the damn path. The people I was with seemed to know him, seems they're rebels too or something. Anyway, the one who spoke English said I should go with the villager. He took me a fair way, lots of hand gestures, and then he showed me something. It was one of the soldiers from the town... he was dead, looked like he'd been gunned down. But he had a shoulder mounted rocket launcher with him, discharged. He had a map, too... it was our bloody flight plan! This son of a bitch shot us out of the sky, and he was working for the woman in charge the entire time! I'm so pissed... I'm going to go back there, see if they aren't holding my friends somewhere. They trust me, I might get a look around. I'm taking this dead guy's keys, just in case they come in handy.

Chapter 7: Will.

Will was taken from his cell shortly after dawn the next day. His hands and feet were manacled in silver bonds, and despite the give he could feel in the metal, he was too physically weak to break them. Dragged bodily along snowy cobblestone streets by two armed guards, Will found he was to be something of a spectacle. Crowds of people had already formed, some jeering, some quietly watching, but so far none had done more than raise their voice in anger. Peasants, farmers, noblemen, it didn't matter, none dared to provoke the heavily armed escort of guards parading Will through the streets. To either side, he could see a wall of shields. *I wonder... are they to keep me in... or the people out?*

Throughout the night, Will had felt himself growing weaker, despite no further torture. He had in fact eaten a solid meal and been allowed plenty of sleep. No one else had come to see him. He had woken early, in a cold sweat, and had again tried to summon the beast within, only to fail. It seemed that he was being held in check, and that no amount of effort on his behalf could rouse his animalistic self. His wounds from the previous day had not healed, as the reflection of his face in his half frozen water bowl that morning attested. His skin was pink and inflamed, his wounds no doubt infected by the tainted nails of his attacker, and a thin trail of blood still trickled alongside his nose. The sensation of pain had somewhat lessened, in its place a niggling itching sensation had already begun, and Will had already found himself with an urge to scratch at his infected tissue. Left alone in his cell, he had rested and prepared himself as well as he could, knowing that he was being taken to die.

How is it going to happen? Does something special have to happen? Beheading? Burning? Drowning? Whatever it is... I'm supposed to be an example... maybe... maybe I'll be drawn and quartered... and left, undying, hanging in some cage somewhere... flies all over me. She'd do it... doubt she'd even think twice. But what can I do? Even if I get free... what can I do? I can't just fight my way out... I can't keep hurting people. I don't want to. I'm not even sure I'd get away, with so many people around. I wish I knew more of what was going on. Just something. Where my friends are, what is happening to me, what I've become. Whether she lived. I'm not only going to die... I'm going to die not knowing anything.

A sharp cry brought him back to the present. Ahead, through the wall of halberds, Will could see a white blob. In his feverish, injured state, Will's vision took several seconds to adjust to see the raven haired lady standing atop a podium, in what appeared to be some sort of courtyard. Beneath her, a town cryer stood, shouting something garbled, presumably calling for silence from the unruly crowd. Underneath the raven haired lady lay an indistinct blur, muddy and brown and shapeless on the snowy cobblestone ground. Will was brought forward, and the crowd fell silent. They were watching him, the floor, anything but the raven haired lady calling for their attention. She stood resplendent in white silks, pure and untouched by the dirty snow covering the town centre. She raised her arms, and said something Will couldn't make out. The crowd fell silent, and Will turned his remaining ear in her direction, preferring to hear his fate before he saw it.

“We have with us a berserkr.”

The crowd had finally cast their gaze upon the lady, and now seemed almost held captive by her quietly spoken words.

“He has killed amongst you. He has taken your sons and daughters from you.”

Quietly, people shuffled their feet, unsettled by the mention of their lost people. Will expected more of a violent outburst from the crowd, but they remained subdued. The lady breathed deeply, maintaining an appearance of calm and control. Will thought, just for a second, that he’d caught a quiet snarl in her tone, a hint of bloodlust burning behind her façade.

“Today he will be at your mercy, and his fate will be in your hands. But before you decide his fate, before you can bring down your righteous punishment, you shall see the beast he is. You shall see the man who would slay you all!”

She’s trying to work the crowds up into a frenzy... what... are they all supposed to kill me? How can she show them the beast... when I can’t even... ow...

At a discreet signal, one of the lady’s guardsmen had swung his maul into the back of Will’s left leg. Falling to his knees, he found himself pummeled by blow after blow after blow. Each time, Will could feel the beast within snarling,

trying to stand, to fight back, only to be cowed again. Will could only wriggle and roll as his flesh was mangled, his face and chest brutally battered by blow after blow. Left bleeding and lying on the floor, Will could barely breathe. *Can't go under... not now... can't go under...* A hand fell upon Will's shoulder, and a quiet voice whispered sibilantly in his ear.

“Oh, don't give up yet, berserkr... there's something you need to see... on your feet, monster.”

Struggling to stand, unaided by anyone, Will managed to push himself on to one knee and open his bruised and bloodied eyes. The indistinct brown shape again swam in front of his vision, before finally coalescing into a crumpled figure. *Oh no... Cyntia.* Standing now, unaware of the transition, Will found himself walking barefoot towards her. She looked old, now. Old, battered and bruised. She lay conscious, eyes open, silently watching as Will approach. Suddenly a lantern smashed at Will's feet, sending glass shards along the icy cobblestones. *Can't stop... she must know...* Walking forwards, regardless of the fragments slicing the skin on his soles, the chill numbing his feet, Will made his way to Cyntia's side.

“The girl... the girl... did she... make it? Did they get her?”

Gurgling sounds met Will's question. Opening her mouth, Cyntia showed Will the remains of her tongue, sliced out neatly and then cauterized to stop her bleeding to death. *Or maybe the fire stops her healing... shit... we need to know*

what happened! Cyntia made a feeble, grabbing gesture for Will's hand, pulling him close to her. Kneeling over her, Cyntia made another attempt to speak.

“Schgee... lhives. Iggh... rhaaan... schgee schtayd.”

Falling back, exhausted, Cyntia lay on the ground, no longer looking at Will. Another sharp, ringing blow struck Will across the back of the head, and he found himself lying amongst the treacherously frozen-over cobblestones, looking up as the raven haired lady towered over him. Once more kneeling down, she whispered again in his ear.

“I’ve promised them a monster. I found your friend. Your progenitor, I dare say, given her age. She was quite a catch. It is refreshing to find a surprise like her. So old, so wise. I wonder what she’ll teach me, before the end? Maybe she’ll have something to say, perhaps, about the little one? Did she say something to you, something you’d like to share?”

“She... didn’t... say... anything...”

“Ahh well, a shame. Still, I promised them a berserkr. And here you are...”

Moving back onto her podium, leaving Will exhausted and bleeding on the ground, the raven haired lady again raised her arms. The hem of her white silks were now tinged in red blood. Many of the peasants refused to look directly at her.

Will guessed they were uncomfortable with her bloodied appearance. Unconscious of the stain, oblivious to the crowd's mood, she again started to speak.

“But... why did you cut out her tongue?”

Seemingly oblivious of Will's confusion, the raven haired lady continued her oration to the tense crowd.

“I have told you there is a monster within... a beserkr hiding in the body of this young man, hiding from even our most powerful inquisitions! Lying before you is the very monster that made him, a plague of monsters waiting to tear us all apart! But they still won't show you the berserkr... so I've found their weakness. I've found the one thing that will let you see. It is her!”

Swinging around on the podium, an accusing finger pointing across the courtyard, Will expected the lady to again point at Cyntia. Instead, following her direction, turning his head even as the crowd turned, he saw the child. Bound, restrained but otherwise unharmed, she squirmed in the grip of two small guards. And deep down, anger rose in Will. *She can't...no... not her too... not like this. It is not going to happen. It cannot happen! We won't let it happen!*

Flesh tore from Will, his bones fused into a longer, thicker skeletal system, muscles bunched up and tensed impossibly, and once more Will was the beast. His wrists and ankles remained shackled, and extending beyond the silver bonds,

he still had his human hands and human feet. Despite being almost changed, he still couldn't break his restraints, and he struggled futilely to tear himself free. Without his claws, and walking on bleeding feet, he was no threat to anyone. Victorious, laughing even, the raven haired lady pointed from her podium.

“See, there! There is your damnable beast!”

The crowd, however, remained subdued. Rather than any outcry, there was a discreet shuffling as some people backed away from Will, while others moved closer to take a look. The white lady looked surprised, and then displeased. Screaming, she began waving her arms at the people beneath her.

“What’s wrong with you? Can’t you see him? The beserkr! Look at the berserkr! Look at his ferocious face, his powerful muscles! Look at him, curse you all!”

Whispers began circling amongst the villagers, who now stood heedless of the shrieking, raven haired lady. Uncomfortable with the sudden change in the crowd, the guardsmen themselves also began to shift. Some arranged themselves around Will, others around Cyntia and the lady herself. Will saw a few adroit observers amongst the guards circumspectly began to remove armour and make their way into the crowds. *They don't want to get caught up...* For a moment there was silence, and then fresh snow began to fall. The wind carried snowflakes across the courtyard, partially obscuring the crowd. All of this Will caught with his sharp vision, and then the whispers started.

“...See it? See... he’s the one... he’s the one who can do it...”

“...just like she said... the girl...”

“...Impossible... but look...”

“...then tis time...”

Wild now, the raving lady swore at her guards to disperse the crowd. Swearing and screeching, she began ordering them forwards, only to find them cowering closer and closer together. Her wild flailing and snarled commands sent snowflakes eddying madly. Will was watching the girl, trying to find some way to free her. He realised her guards had lowered her to her feet. Working quickly, they undid her bonds, and lifted her high onto their shoulders. Will thought he could see one of the villagers peeking out from under an armoured helmet. ...*from the massacre*... Confidently standing atop her human podium, the little girl raised her voice high and called out one word, clear as a clarion across the expectant crowds.

“Rise!”

Hearing the call, men began drawing weapons hidden in their cloaks. Many among the guardsmen threw off their helmets and moved to stand beside them. Standing firm, the lady’s remaining soldiers were now heavily outnumbered. Behind them all stood the raven haired lady, bewildered and dazed,

unable to comprehend what was happening. The town cryer had fled, and she now stood alone and exposed standing above her guards. With an incoherent cry, villagers began to rush the podium. All around Will, people started dying. Hard pressed and hopelessly overwhelmed, the soldiers struck wildly at the farmers. They pushed their halberds and swords deep into serfs. In spite of their attacks, the guardsmen were quickly overwhelmed; their long and unwieldy weapons became trapped in the sheer press of the crowd. As the guards cowered behind their shields, the lightly armoured mob moved in to strike their exposed limbs, while the force of their numbers drove many of the soldiers to the ground.

Will staggered to Cyntia, hoping to protect her from the fighting. Dazed and confused, Will looked up to see a guardsman standing over him. Will raised his arms high, trying to defend himself from a blow. The blow struck his bonds instead though, and the soft metal tore asunder. The blade nicked into Will's shoulder, but he barely noticed it. Will's claws extended from his now-free hands, and he unconsciously drew his arms back, preparing to strike the man. Suddenly, Will recognized the face before him as belonging to one of the villagers. He was in uniform but without a helmet, like many of the other turncoat soldiers fighting alongside the crowd. Smiling now, he struck again, smashing the soft metal bonds holding Will's ankles. Free, Will tried to stand, only to fall weakly to his knees. Will saw more people had gathered around, and looked up, hoping for help. And there, incredibly, was the girl; smiling down from her bearer's shoulders.

"No, remain still. You are too hurt now. Safeguard Cyntia... keep her well."

“But... you don’t understand... the lady... she’s... she’s like me...”

“Do not worry...”

Even as the child spoke, the lady atop her podium had begun to shift, becoming more feral and vicious as the crowds pressed in. Raining blows upon the people beneath her, she fought to keep her higher ground.

“She is not alone...”

Will looked up, and instead of the child, alone and afraid, he instead saw a simian creature, with wicked yellow eyes and long claws extending from prehensile fingers. Paying him no more mind, she went leaping from atop the shoulders of her erstwhile protectors. And then the shape shot out of view. After a few moments Will thought he could hear a woman scream in pain. Cowering down, Will used his body to shield Cyntia while the melee raged around them. *Thank god, she’s alive...but... why are these people fighting?*

Travel diary, entry 8.

Okay, travel diary is becoming less and less appropriate as a title. Maybe I should shift to abhorrent record of criminal war crimes. Not mine, either. I found the camp, then I was caught. I've been beaten, and interrogated, and beaten some more. And now they're leaving me alone. I'm to be put to death in the morning. Put to death by some pissant military regime that isn't in power, and has no legal or moral right to accuse me of anything. Murdered, in other words. It's all for shit... those villagers died for nothing, and now I'm going to die along with them. It doesn't matter, anymore. I'm not angry anymore. I did what I could, it just wasn't very much. And the little girl, she might have made it. I guess I found the change I wanted. Maybe I did something good out here. These are my last words, so I really should have spent more time on them. Still, nice of them to let me keep my diary. For now anyway. I love you, my family. I will miss you, my friends. I hope that you all have good lives. Tomorrow I'll face my death with my head held high. I'm proud of what I tried to do, only wish I'd done more. Goodbye.

Chapter 7: Mike.

Sitting in his hotel room, Mike absentmindedly switched channels on the cheap tv. *Someone knows something I don't. Someone likes rubbing that fact in my face. And I'm running out of time. What to do, what to do. On the one hand, I can go in, hard, and maybe get something done. On the other, I can sit here, wait til the doorman comes to kick me out, and then see if my return ticket back home has been paid. What a choice. I need a drink... can't have a drink. Would it hurt? No. So I need it. No. Shaky hands... last thing I need is shaky hands. Damn damn damn. Urgh... that bitch has my answers... she loves that I don't know anything... they were there, damnit. What's so god damned important that she can't tell me? Money... drugs... who gives a shit. There's not much I can do about it... she owns the cops... knows they've already given me the cold shoulder. Wait... not all the cops...*

Flicking the tv off, Mike began to dig around in his pockets. *Aha! Her card. Maybe she's got something...* Mike picked up the phone on the side table and began to dial. Putting the receiver to his ear, he breathed deeply, trying to relax.

“Hi...”

“Sarah it's me...”

“you've reached Sarah's number, please leave a...”

“Aww fucking hell!”

“*click*...shit! Hello? HELLO!? Who is this?”

“Oh shit, sorry, Sarah... it’s me... it’s Mike.”

“... hi Mike... just gimme a few, will you? I’m freezing my ass off here... you called at a really bad time. I’ll call you back in five, if that’s okay? Okay?”

“Oh sure, yep, that’s fine. Five.”

“Bye, Mike.”

Sitting back to wait, Mike tried not to twitch impatiently. *Five minutes... freezing... I wonder if she was in the shower? She sounded pissed though... maybe she’s got someone over... don’t think about it... aww shit, now I’m getting the mental picture. Still... not the worst thing I’ve seen lately...* Distracted, Mike nearly knocked the phone off the wall when it rang.

“Hi, Sarah?”

“Yeah, it’s me, Mike. Sorry about before...”

“Oh it’s okay... you don’t have to expl...”

“I was trying to wash my cat.”

“Uhm... cat. Right.”

“Damn thing scratched me, too, so I was standing there bleeding and soaked when you called...”

“Ohhhhhh, cat. Right... nevermind...”

“... didn’t you hear me...?”

“Sarah... I need your help.”

“You know I haven’t quite finished with the lab results yet... almost...”

“That isn’t what I mean. It’s more important than the lab results... it’s just... I might need, well, an official police observer... I’m thinking of doing something a little risky, and it might not hurt to have an officer of the law with me...”

“You do know I work in the labs, right? Not really there for the law enforcement side of things, exactly?”

“I know... I’m sorry... it’s just, well... there isn’t anyone else I know here, and I’ve got a fairly good idea what’s happened to my friends...ever heard of a place

called Original Sin? The owner has my friends... well, one of them at least... and I..."

"I've heard of the place. Sigh. Damnit Mike, I was all set for a quiet weekend too... I'll get my gun... meet you outside your hotel in two hours... I gather we're going tonight?"

"Tonight was the plan."

"Somehow, I don't think you've thought through that plan much further... see you then. Look, I'll come... but it's only to keep you out of trouble okay? I think we need to talk about this."

*

Okay... there's Sarah...that's a nice dress... oh Christ no... Sitting beside Sarah, only visible as the car pulled closer, sat the two police detectives. Lafferty and Sloan. Damn. Pulling to a stop, all three stepped out, Sarah flanked on both sides by the detectives.

"Well, look who's here, right on schedule. We heard you're about to go and do something stupid..."

"Boys, Sarah. Just out for a leisurely stroll. Gentlemen... if you'll excuse me..."

“Don’t fuck with us. We saw Ms Chemistry Set here strapping on her piece, we knew something’s up. She seemed a little light on details... but we got the gist of it. Sounds like you’re going to do something very, very stupid indeed.”

“Way we hear it, you’re going to go rough up some bar...”

“Taking the nerd along for support, ya stupid prick...”

“Hey, guys, it’s nothing like that...”

“I’m sure it’s not.”

“We’re sure it’s all innocent...”

“Cut the crap. We’re going to have to take you with us...”

“Hang on now! Sarah... tell them I didn’t do anything...”

“Mike... I don’t think you understand...”

“Yeah, Mike, you don’t understand. Hardly surprising, is it? We’re coming along, Mikey... so shut your face, get in the car, and we’ll talk on the way.”

“Coming along?”

Aww fuck. And I was off to such a great start...

“Oh, Mike... by the way... I kinda rushed your lab results... they haven’t told me much... but I DID get your coat back...here...”

“Oh... wow, thanks Sarah... I don’t think you realise what it means to me...”

“I did have to wash it though...”

“You did what-what?”

“Leave it out, you two... get in the back...”

*

Pulling up around the corner from the club, Mike, Sloan and Lafferty stepped out of the car. Sarah had already gone in through the front door; dressed to the nines, busy blending with the crowd. On the ride over, the detectives had tried to explain why they were helping, and Mike in turn had done his best to listen.

“And you’re sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t really think you get it. We’re not as bad as your fucked up head seems to think... Sloan and I joined the force to stop crime... and this isn’t just crime, it’s big. Most of the force are corrupt... on the take, looking the other way. Doing what they gotta do to not get shot. And then there’s us.”

“We’re trying to find a way... a way in. There is no way. Evidence gets lost... people disappear. Witnesses don’t last so long in police custody anymore, if you get my drift. There’s no stopping it. And then you came along...”

“Yeah, well, I’m all about making an impression...”

“Don’t be an even bigger dickhead. You’ve got the right idea... you’re from out of town... you’ve got as much a reason to be pissed as anyone here... and you’re the only one that can do what we need. We can’t just go in and shoot up the place... that’s not good at all... we’ll get arrested just as soon as the bent cops get here... assuming there aren’t some inside already, getting a little play. And bam, away we go. You though, you are exactly what we need.”

“So you get it? You go in, make some noise... someone makes some noise back... and then we’re here. And whatever else happens, happens. We’re here, so we’re enforcing the law, trying to get guns and arrests... responding to a disturbance even... and then wham, shit goes down, and somehow this place gets so much attention that it disappears.”

“What about me?”

“You also disappear... we keep your head down a few weeks... and then, plane ticket outta here, bon voyage.”

“I like it. But guys... I’ll be lucky to get inside... Sarah can just walk in, they don’t even know who the hell she is... but they’ve got guys on the door with my face stamped into their knuckles... and you two, well, you just stink of bacon and donuts.”

“We’re not going in quietly though... and as for noise... I can help.”

“But why now? Why tonight?”

“Two reasons. One: you’re probably going anyway, whatever we say... and two: we’ve heard they’re exposed. Some big deal... and it is happening soon. Maybe if we do this right, we can bring everything to an end. Anyway, come see what I’ve got for ya...”

Lafferty walked around to the back of his car, and opened up his boot. Inside, lay an impressive arms cache; handguns, shotguns and rifles packed side by side in custom fitted foam.

“Holy shit... Lafferty... I wondered why you drove like I was Miss Daisy...”

“Well... we didn’t make it to detective by being all smiles and sunshine. We took our bribes, just like the rest...”

“Thing is, when no one knows you’re getting the money... no one really knows what you’re spending it on either. Rock up at work with a new boat, people notice. Build yourself an armory fit to take down a dictator, and invest in your future without getting much attention. Besides, a few of those are confiscated weapons...”

“Okay... here’s the deal... we need you to make some noise... so here it is.”

Reaching into the guns, Lafferty pulled out a strange shotgun.

“This... is the Pancor Jackhammer. She’s one of only two firing models said to have been made... fully automatic shotgun, ten rounds in the magazine, 240 rounds per minute, not that you’ll likely get a chance to reload her much, comes in at a bit under five kilos. Cartridges stay in the magazine, she kicks like a mule, and if you open up on something, it’s going to go splat. Short tugs on the trigger for individual rounds, no real way of switching it to single fire.”

“Holy shit! I can’t use this!”

“Sure you can. It’s a beast, but it’s short, light for what it is, and I’ll tell you one thing... it’ll get noticed. If it looks a bit familiar, you might have seen it in Terminator... the T-800’s used mockups as their laser rifles.”

“Well... it’s a bit bigger than my pistol, sure... ten rounds? That’s all I get?”

“Well, I’ll give you a few extra magazines, but reloading it is fairly tricky... here, lemme show you.”

“What exactly are you trying to compensate for, anyway Lafferty? This isn’t quite like a magnum...”

“I’m trying to make up for the fact the only pussy I get when I come home meows at me. What can I say? I like big guns.”

“Would you believe he got that for \$10,000? Nuts, isn’t it.”

“...is that cheap?”

“Not even close. Someone wanted to sell me a MIG for that price.”

“Yeah... stupid bastard nearly got it too, til he realized he couldn’t fit it into his garage...”

“Blow it out your ass, Sloan...”

“So what about you, Sloan? Bazooka stuffed into your wallet?”

“Me? Nooo sir. I’m more about substance than style. GLOCK 18. Quiet, accurate, efficient, reliable. And close enough to standard issue not to raise any eyebrows.”

“Sure sure, won’t raise any... might blow them off though. I’ve heard people say your gun can have explosive malfunctions, sends barrel shards right up your nose...”

“Keep it clean and well maintained, the manual says, and it’ll look after you. Maybe you should worry more about looking after the guns and less about what movie they were in?”

“Okay, Lafferty... I kinda get how it reloads... but what are you going to be using?”

“Something special... meet the Freedom Arms 83 Revolver! She fires .454 Casull rounds, one of the most deadly hand guns in the world right now. I’d let you use her, but I think she’d take your arm off. I call her Eliza.”

“Of course... you would... lemme guess... my gun has a name too...”

“Her? Yeah... she’s Sarah. Got a lot in common with the nerd inside, if you ask me... good figure, kinda short, full of hot air...”

“Alright, Mikey... in you go... make us proud. We’ll be right behind ya.”

*

Just me and Sarah now... romantic dinner for two... okay, not quite what I had in mind, but it’ll do for now. Time to get us some answers...

Walking up to the door, shotgun concealed in his newly cleaned and much more stylish trenchcoat, Mike kept his head down and his eyes open.

“Hey, look who’s back... fuck off!”

“But, I’ve got a friend inside... I just need to see her... and I’ll be out of your way...”

“What kinda moron do you take us for?”

“Guys... please... just need to see my friend...”

“Break his nose. I’ll watch for any funny stuff.”

“Please? Her name is Sarah!”

Pulling the Jackhammer from under his coat, Mike lifted it to his shoulder in a clean swing. Caught off guard, the bouncers belatedly reached for concealed pistols. Seeing the motion, Mike gently pulled back the trigger on the gun, hoping to catch the front one cleanly in the shoulder. The gun fired three shots in rapid succession, and at the close range the first shot took off the lead bouncers arm, the second slammed through his throat, and the third hit the second bouncer beside him in the face. Blown back by the force of the gun, Mike could only watch stunned as both men slid wetly to the floor. And then, the screaming started.

Having cleared the doorway, Mike strolled in casually. Two gunmen appeared on the top floor, but hesitated at firing into the crowd of screaming patrons trying to flee through emergency exits. Pulling the trigger, Mike emptied his clip into the balcony, dropping the two men without either firing a round. Ducking quickly behind the side of the stage, Mike struggled to load a new magazine. Above his head, a few bullets slammed into the concrete wall, the thinning crowds allowing the fully alerted security people more opportunity to fire. Sliding down next to him, out of breath, complete with slinky attire, Sarah came careening around the corner.

“So, Mike... this is all part of the plan, right?”

“Yep... pretty much going how I expected so far. Crowd’s clear?”

“Yeah... exits all over this place, everyone’s out now. Just you, me, and them and what the hell is that thing?”

“Oh... Lafferty’s girlfriend... Sarah... meet Sarah.”

“Oh that’s just sick. I’m going to have to have strong words with him, I think...”

“Yeah, well, the Terminator out there apparently hasn’t heard that it’s not the size that counts... my pistol was too small, offended his delicate sensibilities... hey, what kinda gun is that, anyway?”

“Oh this... Desert Eagle, .50 AE rounds, expensive and bulky, but people seem to respect a girl with a big gun.”

“God damnit... everyone here has a bigger gun than me!”

“Oh don’t worry sweetie, like you said, it’s not the size that counts...”

More fire peppered around Mike and Sarah, and loud blasts sounded from the front door, followed by screams. Lafferty and Sloan came running in, catching the shooters off guard.

“C’mon guys, we’ve got you covered... hurry it up. Where’s this hidden slum then?”

“Just over here... oh shit... that’s new.”

In place of the wooden door from the night before, an ugly steel one stood. Not quite as elegantly blended with the furniture, it did make a bold statement all of its own. The door positively screamed, ‘Keep Out’.

“Uh guys... sorry... yesterday it was made of wood... I just kicked it in. You got a crowbar, Lafferty, in your boot of tricks?”

“Somehow I doubt you’ll need it... you’ve got the key right there...”

“Oh... Jackhammer... right.”

Opening up a full magazine, while the others dived for whatever cover they could, Mike blasted the external hinges off the door. It fell backwards with a resounding thump, still chased by the deafening echoes of the automatic shotgun in such an enclosed space.

“Now tell me that wasn’t subtle... all set?”

She can take it, she's a harbour chick!

I'm going back. The guys are there... or have been. No one else has seen them. And, you know what? If I just happen to stop some evil bitch rising to power in a strife-filled country, that's just one miracle closer to beautification. And then the worship rolls in, oh yeah. I've sucked it up, called for help. I'm meeting the local cop girl, soon. God I hope she's got a spare gun for me, I really don't feel like busting up a regime with a twig and some honky nuts.

Chapter 8: Jonathon.

And the walls came tumblin' down...

Jonathon pressed his hands against the elevator wall to steady himself. Around him, deep vibrations were beginning to shake the foundations of the tower. A deep hum, slowly increasing in pitch was already hurting his ears, punctuated by faint screams from the ground below. With a shuddering jolt, the elevator finally reached the ground. The doors slid open as smoothly as before, but instead of the sterile beauty of AlphaPrime, Jonathon saw chaos. Inexplicable fires had begun across the city, and screaming citizens ran blindly through the streets, carrying possessions as frivolous as they seemed ludicrous. Across from the lift, Burner stood, waving. Jonathon ran through the crowds, coughing at the smoke billowing all around.

“What the hell is going on here, now? Where’s all this smoke come from? The crowds... what the hell are they doing?!”

“Dunno man, dunno. Thought it was you, like. Soon as we came down, almost, the walls started shaking... fire and screams, people running like they heard the voice of the devil, and me n Trigga n Jet trying to drag out the sick ones, like.”

“Are they okay, did they get out?”

“Yeah man, yeah. Stole us some prison wheels, loaded in the weak, let the strong drive. Jet is getting us our own wheels now, Trigga’s watchin out, case her sister comes a runnin’. Maybe she’ll get lucky, like. But man, we gotta go, now...”

“Where are the guards... thought they were supposed to help you guys out...”

“Man, shit going down all around here, jetpacks on their backs, where do you think they gone, like? Over the walls, man... out into nomad’s land, just to get away.”

“Over the walls? But what about... the... shield...”

Looking up, through the smoke, Jonathon saw the sky. *And our worlds came crashing around...* Turning around on his heels, Jonathon looked again, but everywhere he looked, the sky was clear and blue. *It’s gone... no wonder the crowd has gone nuts... they’ve been living in this bubble forever... and now, wham, here’s the sky, panic people panic! And now the city is falling apart around them! Jeez... what exactly is Vector trying to do?* Jonathon and Burner began pushing through the crowd, trying to reach Trigga. Pulling her along, they fought their way out to the edge of AlphaPrime, the crowds thicker here, the panic more obvious. Underneath his feet, Jonathon felt the city shake again violently, and he lurched to the side before catching his balance.

“Burner, look, there she is! Lemme go! There she is! Althea!”

Wrenching free, Trigga shot across the streams of crowds towards a distant figure. Jonathon and Burner started after her, but quickly lost sight of them in the dense mass of people. A wave of people surged ahead of them, but briefly in the distance, Jonathon thought he saw Trigga towering over someone tiny, smothering them in her arms. Fighting to keep on their feet against the push of people, Jonathon screamed out to Trigga.

“We’re not gonna get to her like this, we’re gonna have to leave her!”

“No doing, man! We might go, like... but Jet is just gonna drag us right back anyway! Look, here he comes! Here’s the wheels!”

Screaming along the smooth floor, the frightening Interloper vehicle forced back the surging crowds. Jet’s knuckles were white, and here and there along the body of the car there were reddish stains.

“Get in! These people are nuhts! Throwin’ in front of the damn wheels! Can’t stop long, they’ll swarm us! Hey, where’s muh girl, damn it Burnah, you said you had her!”

“She’s just over there... she found Althea! Lets go... maybe with this we can get to ‘em!”

Revving the engine, Jet steadily pushed the massive vehicle into the crowds. Most fled from the terrifying machine, but a few people unlucky enough to have nowhere to go or desperate enough to try their luck found themselves pressed down either under the wheels, or under the feet of the crowd around them. Revving high to deaden the horrific screams, Jet tried not to look as he pushed ahead, while Burner fired his gun wildly from atop the car, trying to further scare the crowd away. Finally, people around them thinned out and Jonathon could see Trigga and a small girl ahead. Leaping down, he ran over to help them fight back to the relative safety of the vehicle, Burner behind him. They left Jet inside the cab, shaking in shock.

“C’mon! Is this her? Put her on my shoulders, stop her getting trampled!”

“Here, take her... anyone comes close, they get a face full of ordnance! Sure you can carry her, way up there man?”

“Let’s just get back, hurry!”

Almost throwing the small girl up to Burner as he climbed into the car first, Jonathon and Jet scrambled in behind. Around them the crowds had begun to thin, but in their place the chaos of flight left detritus and bodies. Jet tried to keep the engine running, but with no where to go and a lack of momentum, the high speed motor stalled.

“We’re gonna have to sit it out, man! The crowds are getting thinner... soon as they’re gone, we can floor it outta here!”

“Fine! Just keep them off the damn car, or we’re gonna have some real problems real soon!”

Taking up positions around the vehicle, Burner Jet and Trigga held their guns at the ready, while Jonathon sat down in the back with the small girl. Looking at her closely for the first time, Jonathon saw that she was almost unremarkable in her resemblance to the citizens of AlphaPrime, down to the light, almost emaciated frame and small eartech device poking out. Suddenly, the child up and tapped at her ear. The motion took Jonathon by surprise.

“She wants to talk to you.”

“Oh, uhm... thanks... I guess.”

Tentatively, Jonathon concentrated on his own eartech, still afraid it might contain some sinister function unknown to him, and listened. The white noise staccato began, carrying Vector’s words to him clearly over the surrounding chaos.

“Stay with the crowd. You will be safe. Although AlphaPrime is dying, you must stay for the end.”

“But I... what the hell is happening anyway?”

“You will see, you must see. Otherwise, you won’t find your way home.”

“Why... why did you listen to me anyway? Why are you doing this?”

“No one ever asked me to stop, nor showed me how to. The first ones wanted me to do exactly this, so I remained. The ones that came after attempted force to end me, and were pacified. The ones who followed them were unaware of me, and I was deified. And then no one knew what I was. I exist to provide the Vector, and now there is another vector to follow.”

Holding the eartech close, Jonathon didn’t hear any more words from Vector. Around the vehicle, the crowds had finally died down. Most of the people had simply fled through the shield wall, running madly into the outside lands. Some cowered in their homes, or huddled together in family groups. But for the first time, Jonathon noticed that the elderly were not to be seen in the crowds at all. Looking around frantically, disturbed to notice that the weaker citizens of AlphaPrime didn’t appear to be visible at all, Jonathon felt cold.

“Guys... the way is clear... time for you to go, I think. I’m... I’m staying. I’ve got to find out what’s happening here... something isn’t right, still.”

“Man, we can’t stay... gotta get Trigga’s sister out to the village, like. We’ll come back... soon as we can, like. If you’re here... we’ll look after you, try to help, like. If not... we’ll find you, see you... um, get treated with respect, yeah?”

“Yeah, I know... sounds nuts, right? But I still haven’t found a way home... Vector said there was one... and maybe this is my shot. Okay guys... you better go... while you can.”

“Take care man.”

“Thanks for everytin, like.”

“Yeah, I hope we see you again... or you get home...”

Finally, a quiet voice piped up from the back seat.

“I hope you get home, too.”

Hopping out of the vehicle, Jonathon waved as the Interlopers shot out of AlphaPrime in a squeal of vulcanized rubber on concrete. Standing alone in the now almost desolate city, Jonathon began to slowly head back to the main tower.

*

Walking through the deserted streets, Jonathon periodically focused on his eartech to listen, only hearing static. Many of the fires had burned out, with little flammable material apparently in the city they mostly appeared electrical in nature, and left Jonathon wheezing from the smoke. After several minutes, Jonathon finally encountered his first citizen since the mad exodus. Quietly, calmly, an elderly woman picked her way through the debris. She ignored Jonathon's attempts to get her attention, and continued on towards the tower. Soon, she was joined by several more elderly, until finally, as they reached the tower, well over three thousand people waited patiently in a tranquil mass. One by one, they stepped into the lift, disappearing upwards. Focusing on his eartech again, hoping for an answer, Jonathon finally heard Vector's voice, now a faint whisper.

“This is the way. I cannot use wildmen, so I use those who cannot survive without me. I have discovered the truth of the amber drops. More than any technology I could create by pure artifice, they are alive, sentient. The consciousness is combined with a portion of my cellular memory, reconstituted into a neural network mesh, suspended in the amber substance that can endure time, powered by solar light and will. It is by dying that I ensure I lived.”

“Consciousness? Whose?”

The old ones, the ones answering my call. They will live on, as the amber drops.

*The voice...that explains why the amber had a voice...*Jonathon could only watch as elderly people ascended the shaft, one by one. Soon the number of people remaining on the ground had dropped to only a few hundred, then tens, and finally the last of the elderly, a frail looking older man with no hair and innumerable wrinkles on his face, walked stiffly into the elevator. Turning to face Jonathon, he had tears in his eyes. With a quiet swoosh, the doors closed, and the last of the citizens of AlphaPrime climbed the tower.

“What now, what happens now... how did you fit them all up there? Where are the drops... I don’t see any.”

“Watch... you will see...”

A pulse of light shot downwards from the tower, intense and brilliantly golden. Throwing his arms over his face, Jonathon managed to peer through his fingers. Shooting from the light, bursting through the top of the tower itself, thousands of tiny sparks flew out. Each shot further across the sky than Jonathon expected, leaving scorching trails in their wake. And in the eartech, a faint voice echoed.

“The last one... is your way home. I am... your way home. Follow the red... the red trail... that is the one... that I... shall be in... follow the red teardrop... it can take you... home...”

Fading away to a whisper, the voice ceased. In the same instant, the tower itself erupted, completely blowing apart the top half in a massive burst of sickly crimson light, expended energy and heat. Blown backwards several feet, Jonathon quickly scrambled to find cover as shards of hot metal fell around him. And in the sky, a searing red line shot in a descending arc, impacted audibly into the ground several miles away.

And the angels fall from the sky...

*

Stealing one of the remaining prisoner transport vehicles, Jonathon screamed across the desert dunes towards the red object. The trail had quickly faded from the sky, but the mark it left had burned itself almost on Jonathon's retina, and he unerringly drove towards it. Approaching the reddish object, Jonathon thought he saw a figure in the distance. Pulling closer, he left from the vehicle and ran forwards. Sitting next to the red crystal, lost in thought, was Erik. He started as Jonathon approached.

"Nat... what's going on?"

"Sorry man... I really don't know... where the hell have you been?"

"I'm not sure you'd believe me, if I told you. How's your hip holding up?"

“Eh? Oh... fine, never better. Look... do you see that thing behind you?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s our way outta here... we gotta go, now...”

“Sounds like a plan... but I already tried... whatever I try, it doesn’t work...”

“What? Shhh...”

“Hello Jonathon... if you want to use this chamber, you need a key...”

“What the hell? Did you hear that, man?”

“Nope... what did you hear?”

“Oh, nevermind... seems we need a key... damnit, I don’t have a fucking key...”

“Key? Hey... will this do?”

Pushing back his hair, a strange ruby light throbbed from Erik’s temple. Turning to face the red object, Jonathon saw it pulse in response to Erik’s key.

“Yeah, that’ll do... where the hell you got that I’d like to know... anyway, here... hold on tight... and in we go...”

Clasping hold of Erik's upper arm, Jonathon slammed his hand heavily onto the reddish crystal. With a sparking of power, burning rather than tingling, Jonathon and Erik found themselves inside the crystal, looking out. The sky burned around them, and the sun got brighter and brighter, the clouds burned away, and then suddenly everything around them was green again. Back in the jungle, the red crystal shattered apart into powder fine fragments and was gone. Falling to their knees, Jonathon and Erik gasped for breath. Dusting himself off, he picked Erik up, and looked around. Around them, the sky was blue, and sunlight trickled gently down onto the sawn tree stumps around them. *Sawn... tree stumps? What the hell? We're back...*

November 13th

Shit, where to begin? We got to the power generator... kicked the shit out of it with technical know-how, and then it all went bad. Some emergency power thing kicked in, the lights dropped, but sirens began wailing all over the place. And then someone ELSE started attacking, I don't know, maybe it was the real army or something, things started exploding and people started running. My guys changed their plan, grabbed as many townspeople as they could save, and got the hell out. I stayed, trying to nick a jeep. I found one, pretty much the only one that wasn't scrap, but there were no keys. And then Erik waltzes in, casual as you please, keys in hand. So we got the hell out of there... and then the jeep crapped itself, so we walked. And, right now, in the distance, I can see a village. Things are coming up Milhouse. No sign of the others... but if we're this close to civilization, who knows?

Thought for the day: Jeeps need fuel. They don't need tree trunks. Who knew?

Chapter 8: Erik.

My bum is burning. Some hero I make... Erik shuffled uncomfortably atop Duergal Aodhfin Fiachra as she flew swiftly through the air. Behind him, the deposed king teetered precariously in the breeze. *I think I was safer when he was a dwarf... we're too heavy... I'm not sure Gal can even carry both of us... and he's back there, moving around. Wonder if I could imagine him back into the little guy... just for the trip...* Trailing fire and smoke through the skies, Erik and his royal escort bucked in the breeze. Far off in the distance, the Queen's majestic castle rose into view. *I guess it's really his castle...* Squinting into the wind, blinking tears out of his eyes, Erik thought he saw thin plumes of smoke. *Nope... not me smoking this time... looks kinda like the castle is... on fire...under attack?*

"Look, the smoke!"

"Aye laed, started withaught ye..."

"The castle is burning! If they're under siege already, it's only a matter of time! We can..."

Erik's words were ripped out of his mouth in a sudden gust of wind. Above the castle, the skies had darkened, and a vicious squall came screaming through the air. Lightning struck, once, twice, pounding the land around the bulwark. Closer now, Erik could see people flying away, struck by bolts. Outside the gates, it looked like soldiers were fighting against demons, ghouls, monsters

and myths. Dying with them, as the bolts from above blasted them asunder, scorching carcasses without discretion. From atop the walls, the defenders could be heard cheering. Erik could see a red glow around the bodies of the monsters. Erik saw human faces hideously distorted in pain, ruddy-brown smears blasted indiscriminately around the walls. Atop the ramparts, the defenders called jeers and insults. *Oh god, they don't know... they see monsters, not people...* Filled with bloodlust and battle-rage, they struck the survivors with a hail of fire and pitch.

“They cannot last, laed. Naught can be done... the siege breaks before tis even begun...”

“Land this damn thing then! Let me help!”

“No time! You canna do naught at the gates... they live or die by their wyrd alone, laed... we go over and in!”

Underneath, Erik felt Duergal Aodhfin Fiachra pull her wings into a steeper angle, and with renewed vigor they shot across the sky, aiming at the heart of the courtyard. Archers on the walls had spotted their flaming trail, and already shafts were thinly peppering the sky around them. It was all Erik could do to hold onto the burning avian as she screamed through the air. Now the sky itself had turned against them, and the lightning bolts came thick and fast all around, scorching air into ozone as they blasted past. Blinded by the flashes, Erik could not see what happened next, but he felt it all the same. Duergal Aodhfin Fiachra let out a piercing cry, and lurched sideways sharply. Erik felt a hand on his

shoulder, and then a push, and he was falling. It was a short fall, but not being able to see the ground, he couldn't prepare for it, and he landed with a jarring thud on his right shoulder. A scream and a wet thump echoed in his ears, but whether it was Gal, the monarch, or Erik himself, he could not say. Blinking away tears and retina burn, Erik slowly climbed to his feet. Around him, the courtyard was in shambles. Burning pitch had also been flung across the walls, and whatever could burn was already ablaze. Smoke, roaring fires, ringing steel and screams from the wounded made for a cacophony, and Erik could only look on, disassociated from the chaos around him. Atop her throne, bloody and wan, the Queen stood, shouting orders to soldiers too busy dying to heed them. Hand upflung, it appeared she had some tie to the storms, as another bolt fell to a wild gesture. At the gates behind him, Erik could hear more screams, and atop the walls the defenders answered with derision and ballista fire. Alone, ignored, Erik painfully made his way to the Queen. A striking red aura encircled her, but Erik did not know what it meant.

“Ah, you’ve come! And just in time! Do you see, the rabble outside? They strike against me! You are fate’s hero, do something, damn you!”

What is it? What does it mean?

“I see them... my Queen. But what can I do? I’m just a soldier... you’re surrounded by men at arms...”

Walking closer, Erik kept his uninjured arm close to his scabbard. Flicking a cursory glance around him, Erik thought he saw a burning carcass partially impaled on part of the battlement. Focusing again on the Queen, portraying an outer image of fealty and concern, Erik tried to concentrate on the red aura surrounding her body. *It's so bright...*

“You must do something! Don't you have any use! Damn you, you are supposed to be the savior! The power... it is somewhere in that weak flesh, man, find it!”

There's got to be some way in... A flare of crimson pulsed from Erik's temple, and in that instant he could see through the facade. Unbeknownst to the Queen, her attention focused on the storm raging above, Erik had managed to pierce her shroud of illusion. *Oh god, what do I do?* Grotesquely sprawled across the throne, rather than standing defiantly atop it, a hideous creature lay. Its flesh ranged from fur to scale, blue in shade. It had four limbs, unmatched to the rest of its body, topped with vicious, bloodied claws. Raised high in the air, a serpent's head was uplifted, and focused on the storm. Watching the guards, shouting orders, a lion-like mien roared commands in the Queen's shrill, piercing voice. And focused on Erik, an old woman's visage gazed, with burning emerald eyes. *She's... she's like a chimera... she's enormous!* Taking care not to look concerned, Erik let his eyes flick across the monstrosity's form. Deep gouges had been dug across the breast of the creature, and a sickly black blood dripped unnoticed to the ground. The serpent's head also had deep wounds, and it wavered

weakly atop the massive shoulders of the beast, exhausted, but it still looked powerful enough to smash Erik aside easily.

Struggling to keep his own gaze on the place the false Queen spoke from, Erik drew closer still. Reaching his hand to his blade, he swiftly drew it, knelt and lay it across his arms. Keeping his eyes low, he quietly spoke.

There's no escaping it...it doesn't matter if this is in my head or not...it doesn't matter if it's real or not...I'm the only one who can see her. I'm the only one who knows...I've got to stop this somehow. Stop her... but what? How can I stop something so massive?

“My Queen... I have delayed my return... I may have gained some power... but I do not understand it... can you help me?”

Get her to look down... get her focused on me... get her to stop the storm, just for a moment...

“What? Why.... why it is good you brought this news to me... perhaps you can save us still... tell me... what is the power you have? What mighty energy lies trapped within your form?”

The serpent's head had indeed lowered itself to focus on Erik, as had indeed all of the heads of the Chimera. *That's it... closer... closer...* Raising his gaze, Erik looked directly at the lion's head atop the monstrous chest.

“Why, my Queen, I have the power to see...”

Leaving Kings and Sultans to weep... God help me...

Taken aback by the change in Erik’s gaze, the monster began to lift itself. Throwing his weight to the right, Erik swung his sword wide as he rolled. It cut cleanly, slicing through the wounded flesh of the serpent’s head. Even as the monster reared in pain, and the severed serpent’s neck toppled to the ground, Erik spun his blade back, and pushing himself to his feet, drove his blade deep into the exposed torso. The lion’s head reared, came smashing down to drive Erik back to his knees, but it was too late. Pushing the sword deeper and deeper, Erik forced the monster back from the throne, and with a final, fiery gasp from the succubus head, the monster slid to the ground. Stunned from the force of the blow, ears ringing and flesh numb, Erik sat heavily on the ground. Suddenly a ringing voice rang out across the courtyard.

“This is your laerd! Returned to ye! The usurper is dead! Release arms, damn you! Recognise me! Open that gate, lend aid to aught wounded!”

Bellowing commands, the imposing monarch reigned in the confused soldiers around him. Restored to his true self, the King quickly established his control over the men, and within minutes the gates were open, and the surviving beasts from outside were brought in. Kneeling before the defeated creature, at the monarch’s feet, the soldiers and beasts alike swore fealty. All the while the King,

resplendent in his steel wrought armour, stood triumphantly atop the fallen monster. Erik still sat dazed upon the ground. Underneath him pooled thick black blood, but he was too exhausted to care.

*

A tear trickled down from the King's eye, quickly lost in his thick beard. Surrounding him, the soldiers were already bringing in the wounded on pallets, and were pouring well water onto the fires. Kneeling before the Chimera, the King mumbled quiet words to the corpse, and then came over to Erik.

“She was a monster, a fiend. And she was my Queen, long ago... afore the wickedness struck her daen. She was the Cailleach, tis true, but for a time she was Deò-ghrèine, to my eyes.”

“You’re crying for her? You still loved her, after all this?”

“Od’s balls, look araund, laed... monsters are everywhere, nae? Just like them, not all were baern that way.”

“I’m sorry... but... she caused a lot of pain. I’m not sure many will forgive her for that.”

“Ye reap what ye sow, laed... something best ne’er forgotten...”

The King wiped his eyes clear again, and turned to face Erik. Coughing, trying to cover the pain in his voice, he continued on.

“Ye did weel, laed, in any fashion. But there’s more... the beasties, ta begin... look upon them, aye? Cast asunder the false and the true.”

“...I’ll do what I can...”

Walking first to the wounded, Erik looked deep into the red glow surrounding the beastly forms, and with a gentle pulsing of crimson, the red aura of illusion fell from them. At first traveling from one to another among the injured, Erik then moving onto the hearty, until finally only the beastly cadavers remained. Each in turn was restored to human form by his gaze. Many did not look the better for it, with hideous scars and injuries leaving many a wreck of tissue, ugly to the eyes of most, but all were thankful for the change that could speak it. Soldiers followed him around, a small crowd that continued to grow. As they watched, lost family members long thought dead, friends and neighbours, all were restored. Many wept, ashamed at raising arms against their kin, or in the case of one soldier, striking dead his beloved with his own sword. Restoring the beasts took the better part of the afternoon, and it was well into the evening before the work was done. Erik, tired and still sore from the events of the day, retired to a room set aside for him in an unburned wing of the castle.

*

In the morning, roused by the King himself, Erik went out to say farewell to Duergal Aodhfin Fiachra. The corpse atop the bulwark had indeed been the noble creature, caught by a stray bolt of lightning, she had flown as low as she dared. The King had flung Erik aside, and dropped from the avian himself, right before another bolt caught her directly. Falling heavily, already dying, she had carried them as close to the ground as she was able, and incapable of pulling herself back into the air, had slammed hard into the stone parapet. Still aflame the next day, Erik felt tears slide down his cheeks at the sight of the fallen beast. *Damn bird... we never would have made it back without her... and she's just lying there... we can't even put her out to bury her.* Standing a somber vigil over the beast for over an hour, the King and Erik watched as the final flames starved. In place of a corpse, all that remained was a fine white ash. A gust of wind came, and that too was gone as the ash was caught on the thermals of a fire below. Erik felt a hand rest on his wounded shoulder as he was about to leave. Wincing, he turned towards the King.

“Laed, twasn’t for naught, look.”

Left in the wake of the ash, a small, dull egg sat. Unscorched, unmarred, the tiny ovoid resembled nothing so much as a chicken egg. The King reached down and cupped the egg gently in his calloused hands before drawing it close.

“She will rise again, laed... with care...”

“She can do that? You can do that?”

“Oh, aye, aye. She’ll be back... but nae, perhaps tis time to talk of getting ye back, yerself...”

*

The King, and a royal entourage had escorted Erik to the edge of Dyfed’s miasma. Declining any reward, carrying nothing but Ming stuffed into a pack, Erik rode uneasily atop his horse. Around him, Patch, Creag, and Adem rode, while Hamish followed in a litter behind. Having arrived at the miasma, they had expected some sort of spectacle, a show of power that Erik didn’t understand to part the grey fog isolating their world. Half a day of waiting had left them disappointed, however, until finally Erik had asked them all to leave. Having said his goodbyes, assuring them he could make his way back if the miasma didn’t lift, Erik watched as his companions had trailed back to the castle. *There’s more to do that just sit here watching me... and I’m not sure anything is going to happen anyway. Maybe it really is all in my head... how am I supposed to escape something like that?*

Erik’s eyes glazed from staring at the fog as he sat motionless on the floor. He was jarred back to reality by footsteps behind him. Turning, incredulous, he saw Nat standing over him. He looked just like he had when they had parted ways last. *Maybe... maybe this is it... a way out... finally?*

“Nat... what’s going on?”

“Sorry man... I really don’t know... where the hell have you been?”

“I’m not sure you’d believe me, if I told you. How’s your hip holding up?”

“Eh? Oh... fine, never better. Look... do you see that thing behind you?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s our way outta here... we gotta go, now...”

“Sounds like a plan... but I already tried... whatever I try, it doesn’t work...”

“What? Shhh...”

“What the hell? Did you hear that, man?”

“Nope... hear what?”

“Oh, nevermind... seems we need a key... damnit, I don’t have a fucking key...”

Gesturing vaguely at the mist, Nat’s gesture had somehow outlined a vague doorway hidden inside the fog. Finally seeing a doorway that he hadn’t

noticed on his own, Erik could see a tiny keyhole in the mist. Translucently shimmering, it glowed with a crimson hue.

“Key? Hey... will this do?”

Looking directly at the keyhole, Erik pushed his mind’s eye through, and then the miasma around the door was gone. Standing alone, looking through a doorway, Erik could see jungle on the other side.

“Yeah, that’ll do... where the hell you got that I’d like to know... anyway, here... hold on tight... and in we go...”

Grabbing him by the wounded arm, Nat almost dragged Erik back into the jungles. Wincing in pain, Erik struggled to turn. They’d come through the doorway, but nothing lay behind them. *It’s all gone... maybe it was never there... and here’s Nat... and maybe things might be alright again, now that I’m not alone out here...* Nat caught sight of something in the distance, through the trees, and pulled Erik into a run. Taking care not to drop Ming, Erik did his best to match the pace...

Day 9.

This is very much a mixed emotion day. I did something I'm very ashamed of, today. Someone died. It is my fault. It had to be done... someone had to stop her. I've stopped her, stopped the stream of lies and violence, or at least I hope so. I finally managed to find out some of what happened here. And I've found Nat, too! We're leaving this place, the "rebels" (locals that were held in check by this vicious woman's regime) have started fighting back, and it isn't very safe anymore. And, wouldn't you know it? Those keys turned out to be for a jeep that Nat found. We're going to try to get to Quito.

Chapter 8: Will.

Slowly, the sounds of battle began to fade in Will's ears. Curled tightly around Cyntia, protecting her with his body, he found himself barely able to loosen his grip. All around him lay bodies; both guards and peasants. Many of the guards' bodies displayed horrific wounds. They had been torn apart by farm implements, improvised weapons and bare hands. The villagers had not fared much better, with their bodies cast aside carelessly. Already the snow had started to cover the fallen, leaving white-dusted faces framed in reddish snow. They had thrown themselves valiantly against the first blows of the guards, had caught the brunt of their armed attack and left their killers vulnerable to the massacre that followed.

The child, her followers, and the survivors of the fight were nowhere to be seen. The melee had carried them far from even Will's heightened senses. A gurgling sound at his feet drew Will back to his immediate concerns. Cyntia, bleeding and mute, had dragged herself over to a fallen guardsman, and with little preamble began to glut herself on his still flowing blood. Visibly recovering from ingesting the dying man's vital fluid, she redoubled her efforts, and soon he lay exsanguinated upon the cobblestones. Quickly, Cyntia scrabbled over to another fallen soldier and began to drink anew. Sympathetic hunger pains rippled through Will, and with some hesitation he bent his maw down to a bloodied body and began to tear meat and sinew from its arm. Keeping a watchful eye for the villagers, lest they return and catch him devouring carrion, Will sated his hunger. He took care not to partake of the flesh of fallen townsfolk, only guards.

“I... am recovered, somewhat... we should go... before they get back.”

“Do you think you can make it? If they catch us again, they might not be so forgiving...”

“I can... and they probably will be... but I can’t explain why... the child, Andrea... she did something... they are her people, after all...”

Letting his animal instincts guide him, Will led Cyntia away from the courtyard and into the snowy woods. Picking up a scent that seemed familiar, an old path he had traced a few days earlier, they ran until they had reached the jungles once more. Motioning Cyntia to slow her pace, Will calmed his emotions, and shed his animal form.

“It might be better if we just fit in, from here on in... I don’t know what they’d do if they see us like that... and we can’t go back to your hut... someone who knows the way there might try to bring them...”

Before he could finish, a blur of fur shot out from the side of the jungle and leapt upon Will’s chest. Thrown to the ground, shaken, Will instinctively started to change. Behind him, he heard Cyntia’s catlike hiss of surprise, but after a moment’s pause it was eerily followed by her laughter.

“There is nothing to fear... calm yourself...”

Lowering his protecting guard, Will looked down and saw the simian-like form of the Andrea wrapped around him. As he watched, her features blurred and in moments her visage had returned to normal. Although she was smiling, Will couldn't help but notice the blood that was splattered across her arms.

"I was looking for you... I came back... I wanted to make you safe... but you'd gone. I sent others, every which way, looking for you... but I came on my own, just in case. I didn't think you'd make it this far... you move fast..."

"Child, we did not want to stay... who knows what they would have done to us, there..."

"They wouldn't have done nothing bad."

Steel had crept into Andrea's voice now, and a flicker of anger crossed her eyes.

"Don't you see? They are MY people... after my father died... my kunta... my family... the ones that lived.... they were alone. They took my cousin away, Althea... so many people were taken or killed. So I spoke to the ones that were left... and then, then I showed them. I showed them the change, and they listened. They followed. We came, not just for you, but to try and get them back. To get them all back. You are safe, back there... we're all safe."

“But... how? Last time I saw you... you were dying. Dead, almost... I just... it took me so long to recover... but you... it hasn’t even been a day!”

“She was healed fast enough... that much I saw. And then the soldiers came. I tried to lead them away... killed as many as I could... but they managed to beat me down... I could only hope she got away, as I lay on the ground. They cut out my tongue, my teeth, my fingers... anything that might let me call for help or harm them. I... I scarcely believed she had fled...”

“I got away. I remembered a story, when I saw you fighting... and I was scared. But I didn’t run though... I hid. I climbed up, up onto the roof, and I lay there... I watched. I saw you change... just like the story. Night time stories, my kunta told me... about the berserkir. Animals that hunt, sneaking in the night, taking sheeps and naughty children... and helping, too. Not good, or evil, like the Lady said, just something... different. And then I knew... it was you... and him... it was me. He bit me, just like in the story. So I knew. And then I waited... and then, after they went, I changed, just like you... just like both of you. And I followed... and saw... and then, in the dark night, I ran to find my family.”

“But, they followed you, your family? Your village? You’re just a little girl... you were running and hiding and climbing trees... before... they came. How did you make them understand? Why did they follow you?”

“I did what I could do... I set them free. I ran... right to their cages... I hid from the mean guards... I climbed trees... and I leapt onto their heads, biting and

scratching. It was very messy. I feel different, too... I'm older... I can tell. I don't look it, but I just think it... I'm older, and I was angry, and scared, and I needed their help. There was no one else left. So I helped them. And I showed them. And I asked them to help free mother... and then I heard about you. About what they were doing. I sent everyone out... they told family and friends... we've been hoping, praying... anything... something to come and get rid of the Lady... and now it was time. So we all played a trick... she'd be alone, and she wanted us all had to be there. But I knew she wouldn't be scared of so many of us... so that's when we'd fight her. And find you, maybe. Everyone thought it was such a clever plan..."

"That... serves her right... she thought you were all so cowed... serves her right. Did you get her? In the end?"

"No... I scratched and fought, but she is like us... older, sneakier. Bigger. I think I cut her, pretty deep, but then she ran. And all her mean guards got beaten up, and then we'd won. People went after her, but it was too late, she'd run back into her big house. She's not dead yet... but now the people are waiting outside, and she daren't come out. So she can't get away."

"What happens now, child. Do you lead your people, even still?"

"No... I don't know who does. My mummy was stabbed dead, and most of the other people have their own Jarls. I told them what happened, they say you are my new mother... 'cause of we're berserkir. They said when you both came

back, she'd be in charge of the kunta. The other kunta elders thought it was right, too, 'cause she helped us before. Even though we're berserkir, they don't mind. Well, some of them are scared, but you're not as scary as the Lady."

"What? Andrea, I can't stay! Cyntia... you understand... I've got to go."

"What? No! You... you have to come, you just have to! The kunta... the kunta needs you... and I'm all alone... Cyntia and me and you, you'd be like my husfolk... they're mostly gone now. The Lady took them away from me!"

"I understand... I realise we cannot ask you to stay... I will look after Andrea, raise her as my own..."

"Thank you... I... I guess I am responsible too, now... uhm... I never realized... I just wanted her safe... I'm sorry, I just can't stay with you... I've got friends, maybe out here somewhere... maybe dying... I have to find them, make sure they're safe..."

"... I know. But you'll come back, right?"

"I'll try. But first I want to take you back to your people... your people too now, I guess, Cyntia... if you're going to be part of her family..."

"Yes, I think I will. I will have to move into the village, or what's left of it. Maybe, in time, we can rebuild much of what's lost. Maybe their pain will go

away. At least if I am with them, I can protect them... I've lived alone for so long, it will be some adjustment though, to be sure."

"Let's head back there then... I want to make sure everything is alright... can't just up and leave, need to know things are taken care of..."

*

With Andrea leading them back to her village, Will dragged his heels, hoping to have a quiet word with Cyntia. Andrea had just climbed a tree, hoping to get a better idea of where things lay in the jungle, giving him the opportunity he sought.

"Cyntia, hey. Are you ready for this? To be her parent, I mean..."

"Why of course... it's only natural, that she should cling to us... we did save her, yes?"

"Yeah... but, I mean, are you going to be around for that long... I hate to be rude, but you're kinda old..."

Cyntia quietly began to laugh. Looking directly at Will, she held his gaze with her piercing eyes. As he watched, her face began to shift, wrinkles fading away, even as vibrant brown colours began to streak through her greyed hair. In a

few moments, the elderly visage of Cyntia had been replaced with a much younger, healthier woman barely in her mid thirties, if Will would hazard a guess.

“I’ve told you before... age is relative. We live a long time, you and I... and I’ve learned a few tricks, things that may one day come to you. I’ll live long after she is grown, rest assured... and I’ll teach her, see that she learns the things you will have to learn on your own...”

“I don’t get it. I just don’t get it. You can make yourself younger... but there you are, crone-like, living in a hut in the woods?”

“Ahhh, crone-like... I looked old, yes. I felt old... I’ve lived a long time... much of it alone. I’d decided that perhaps it was time to pass on, leave this world behind. I had never even thought about children, before. And now I have one... and I feel young again, alive. I’ll stay young, raise Andrea to lead her people, protect them... and then, perhaps, it will be time for me to think about moving on. Or not, who knows... as you may have garnered, life can lead you down strange paths, Will.”

“I guess... I guess that’s what I’ve always wanted...”

Andrea scampered down the tree, and without batting an eyelid at Cyntia’s change, ran over to her. Together, they continued through the foliage.

*

Much to Will's surprise, the scorched village was indeed filled with people once more. The bodies had been dragged from the makeshift funeral pyre, and given a proper burial, and even now people from other villages worked with the survivors to assemble new huts and shacks. Fresh snow covered the massacre from only a few days ago, and already much had been rebuilt. Greeted with exhausted cheers as she walked in, Andrea looked every bit the savior of her people. Lifted high upon weary shoulders, she was paraded around from doorway to doorway, and everywhere she was seen more people followed in her wake. Will was less surprised to find that he and Cyntia were given a somewhat wider berth, although despite the distance he felt no ill will, merely wariness. *Good. I'd be bloody wary too, standing next to something like me. They're smarter than they look, really.* Andrea called to Cyntia, and soon she was part of the impromptu festivities too. Will kept his distance, despite even the crowd eventually urging him to join them. *I can't get attached now... I can't stay... it's not over, and for the first time, I've got a real chance at finding my friends.*

As the night began to wear down, Will quietly made his way to Andrea and Cyntia.

"Okay... I'm convinced... things are back to normal... well, better really. I think it's time for me to move. It's only been a few days... if I set out now, move quickly, maybe I'll still catch a faint trail."

"Take care, Will. Andrea and I will miss you."

“You’ll come back, won’t you? I don’t want to grow up alone...”

“You know what... I’m going to try. I’ve got to find my friends... and then I’ll have to fly home... but once I’ve sorted things out, I’m going to try and come back. I think I could find my way here again, now... and if you’re still here, I’ll be back after that, okay?”

“And you’ll stay?”

“Yes.”

“Goodbye, Will. I hope you fare better now that much of the stain is gone from this place.”

“I can only hope. Take care, okay? I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Will... before you go... do you remember when you asked me what you were? How I didn’t know?”

“I remember...”

“I still don’t have an answer for you... only that you are different from I. But the people here, they have a name for you... a different name. They name you an Ulfhedinn... perhaps that is somewhere you can start looking.”

“Thank you... for everything.”

Walking quietly away from the village, Will disappeared into the darkened woods. Adopting his animal form, he began sprinting towards the jungle. *Well... I've been east... and that led me here... let's see what I find north...* Running for barely an hour, a baying howl escaped Will's lips, echoing through the trees. A *familiar scent... people...*

Travel diary, entry 9.

They saved me! I cannot explain it. I'm still in shock. I was taken, dragged out of my cell, they were going to shoot me. People were everywhere. I think I was going to be an example or something. Then, wham, all of a sudden, people from everywhere started screaming, pulling out guns and all sorts of scary farm implements. I was in the middle of a revolt, or something. And, right at the back, in the arms of an honour guard, was the little girl. I don't understand, exactly. I think she got everyone together, somehow. In the space of one night, the survivors of her village raised an entire army of the people around here. The woman in charge has run off, vile bitch, she was, I hope she doesn't get far. And now, here I am, surrounded by these people that have just fought and died to save me, and it's incredible. They've fought for their freedom. And I feel like I helped. I'm staying here tonight, and then in the morning, I'm going to try and head to Quito. I can find the way from here I think. By now, if any of my friends made it out, they'll be there.

Chapter 8: Mike.

“Hey, how the fuck do I load it again?”

“Goddamnit, just slap...”

“I’m kidding... see, got it.”

Mike was advancing cautiously down the hallway, Sloan and Lafferty flanking him on either side from behind. Sarah kept an eye on the doorway. Fire alarms were screaming, whether from an actual fire or triggered as a call to arms Mike couldn’t decide, and while they walked sprinklers were raining water thickly onto the already slick concrete flooring. *There’s gotta be more of these guys... no way it was just the ones outside... this place is huge... has to be teeming...* At the end of the hall, a figure flew into view. Running full tilt, away from something out of sight, he slid to a halt as he saw Mike and his companions. Raising his hands to indicate he was unarmed, he started to run past.

“Shall we take him?”

“Nah... let him go... he’s running from something, not to it. Didn’t even have a gun.”

Screams echoed down the corridors now, and a round of gunfire caused Mike to drop to his knees in preparation, but no more fire followed. Reaching the

end of the hallway, Mike swung the Pancor to the left, the direction the fleeing man had come from, while Sloan and Lafferty kept an angle on the right. *Nothing... not another god damned shot at us... they HAVE to know we're here... we made so much noise coming in... but not a peep out of them now... this isn't right...* Moving to the left, unsure of which direction he should be headed, but damned if he was going to let anyone else know that, Mike quickened his pace. A few more hallways, no conflict at any point, and then they reached another steel door. Mike braced the Pancor against his shoulder, preparing to fire, but Sloan placed a hand on his shoulder and mouthed the words 'It's unlocked'. Using the muzzle of his gun, Sloan pushed the door open carefully, while Lafferty kept his firearm aimed in the ever increasing gap. Without a sound, the heavy door slowly swung open, revealing a scene of carnage.

“Well goddamn... looks like we're too late, after all.”

“Guys, what is it?”

Sarah, guarding the hallway, had turned her head to look into the room. Turning to answer her, Mike saw a gunman at the end of the hall, peeking out to take a shot.

“Down!”

Firing before Sarah could hope to respond, Mike aimed high and swung his muzzle low and across the hallway exit. Sarah, deafened and blinded by the

fire, fell to her knees, spun around, and began to fire aimlessly down the hallway. Sloan and Lafferty retreated into the room, making room for Mike to drag Sarah behind some cover. The Pancor hot and empty in his hands, Mike found himself weaponless as the shooter again poked around the corner to fire. Sarah had recovered, however, and before either Sloan or Lafferty could aim, she had dropped the man with a single round, striking the small amount of exposed torso as he leaned around the wall. Screaming, he dropped to the floor, and another shot from Sarah's Desert Eagle ended his pain. Closing the door behind them, Mike turned again to look at the scene before them.

The Mistress of the Original Sin... Christ... what a mess. Such an ugly way to go...

Sitting slumped in an office chair, the proprietress of the club at first appeared to be dozing. Anything more than the most cursory of glances revealed she was dead, however. The splash of maroon blood down her throat and splattered all across her red top and mahogany desk wasn't obvious at first, but there were other clues. For one, the woman's tongue had been pulled out through a large incision in her throat, and buried deep into her heart, the hilt of what appeared to be a sword-shaped letter opener stood silver against the sequin dress. In her hand, a crumpled piece of paper, covered in her own blood was caught up in a tight fist. Reaching down, prizing the fingers open, Mike retrieved the paper. Looking closely at it, Mike struggled to read. *...looks like a shipping receipt... there... Erik's name... and again... shit... his old man was selling them industrial chemicals... But why? Still... better keep this one to myself... I'll ask the fucker*

myself, if I get the chance... Crumbling the note up, Mike stuffed it into his pocket.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Well what? Fuck you. What was the note, Mikey? Don’t hold out on us... crime lords just don’t up and die...”

“Suicide note.”

“Suic... Suicide note? Are you being fucking funny? People don’t give themselves Columbian neckties! It’s not exactly well known as a bloody clean way to go!”

“Nope, definitely a suicide note... I think I’ll hold onto it, too... might need it to exonerate me, right? God knows lots of people saw me coming in here, first time round.”

“What the fuck ever... Sloan, you believe this shit? Suicide note... whatever. Sheeit. Let’s get the fuck out, now... she’s dead, this place is history... nothing else we can do, right?”

“There’s one more thing...”

“Mike, what is it?”

Sarah had decided at this point to weigh into the discussion.

“It’s just... you know why I’m here... I came here for answers... I came to find my friends... I haven’t done that yet... I can’t leave here without knowing. I’ve got to make sure they’re not a body, stuffed and bagged in a closet somewhere... sporting formalwear like the lady in red, there. I owe it to them...”

“Well, let’s go look then. Guys, are you coming?”

“Sloan? I’ll stay... I don’t want any one of these fuckers getting outta here, god knows what they’d do...”

“I’ll come along, too. In for a penny... and besides, I want to see if we can find what she was up to anyway...”

Loud thuds sounded from the door behind them, and Mike reached for his last magazine. With Sloan and Lafferty covering the door from either side, Sarah moved behind the desk for cover, while Mike stepped out of the line of fire to reload.

“Mistress! Mistress are you in there!”

Oh shit... they don't even know yet...what could have gone down here, that even the goons have their pants around their ankles? Crap... we can't just shoot the poor bastard... not in cold blood...it's got to stop... I've got to stop...can't keep doing this.

Mike motioned to Sarah, indicating she should say something. Giving Mike a look that made him think she was actually going to shoot him, she cleared her throat and quietly spoke.

“Go away, can't you see I'm busy?”

“But Mistress! There are cops swarming all over this place... Pablo's dead in the hallway... What should we do? What can we do?”

“Well... uhm... how about you surrender?”

“... Mistress? Is that you? I'm coming in...”

“Aww fuck, nice try anyway, Sarah.”

Sloan reached over and swung the door wide open, and without hesitating, Lafferty fired all five of his rounds out into the hallway. Angled at different heights, it took until the third round before the exposed, startled man emitted a sharp scream, and fell to the floor. Mike felt a stab of guilt, as the cold eyes seemed to stare at him accusingly. *But who am I to judge? Especially now? I*

didn't hesitate before, riding on the high of adrenaline... and it's too late to go back now...

“Look, guys, if we're going to go looking, let's do it already.... With the other cops already here, we don't have a lot of time...”

Mike had finally loaded the Pancor, and brandished it triumphantly at Lafferty. Clearly unimpressed, he gestured into the hallway. Moving out in the same formation, with Sarah pulling the steel door shut behind them, they continued back down the hall. *Gotta be cool now... not just bad guys in here... last thing I needa do is shoot a cop...bent or straight... shoot a cop, no way I won't be “resisting arrest”, I'll be lucky if they ever find my damn body... just gotta hope something slows em down...* Gunfire sporadically sounded from the outer chamber, an answer to Mike's unspoken prayers. *Must be a few more goons, caught upstairs or under cover... damn, thought we got em all. Bad for the cops... great for me... gives me a bit more time to look.* Running now, Mike started slamming doors open, looking for his friends, and in particular Erik. *Somehow he's gotten them all mixed up in this... something shady... hell, he might even have killed... nah... he's not like that... no way he'd just leave her like that, all chopped up. Must be a message or something... some crime thing I don't know about... he just couldn't do that...*

Throwing open one room, Mike found bar stocks, while in another a peepshow had been set up, complete with filthy waste baskets in each room. Another contained an impressive cache of weapons.

“Jeezus, will you look at that?”

“C’mon man, we’re not here to shop... you can steal this shit from requisition later...”

“Just the AK?”

“No... we’ve gotta keep moving... Mike’s friends... the beat cops... that dripping corpse in the back room?”

“Yeah yeah... don’t you worry baby, Stevie’s coming back for you...”

“C’mon guys...”

“... think I’ll call her Kali...”

The next room was filled with jars of acid. Mike guessed it was the same stuff he’d had dripping on his face, but the pungent fumes suggested it was a lot stronger.

“Hey Sarah... do you know anything about aqua regia?”

“Yeah... it’s a noxious mix of nitric and strong hydrochloric acid. I don’t think it’s used much now, but it used to be used to melt gold and platinum. God

knows why it's standing here though, because it can't be left long before it becomes weak."

"Uhm... what if it already had gold or platinum in it?"

"Oh sure, then you could... leave... it..."

"Balls! She might have been liquefying gold... we knew she was moving money somehow, but this..."

"C'mon, we've got to go... leave this stuff for now..."

"Aww, Jesus."

*

Continuing from room to room, Mike finally came across the last door of the hall. *Damn... locked... and it's way too noisy for me to start using my key again...*Bracing his foot on the door, Mike kicked at the lock, and with a quiet splintering of wood, the door flew open. Inside, bound and gagged, an elderly man squirmed in a leather gimp suit. Left in the heat of whatever game he had been playing, he was powerless to free himself; hogtied, unable to call for help. Behind him, Sarah started giggling, Sloan snorted, and after a moment Lafferty joined in with a guffaw.

“What’s so goddamned funny? It’s just some sick fucker, having a bit of slap and tickle, hold the tickle.”

“Hey Sloan, he looks a lot better out of the uniform, don’t ya think?”

“Lafferty? Sloan? Sarah... what’s so damn funny?”

“Oh, nothing Mike... nothing... lets just... we’d better get outta here...”

“What about him?”

“Oh... hmph... think we’d better leave him... he looks so comfortable.”

Struggling in his bonds, the gagged man could only squirm vigorously as they filed out of the room, one by one. Finally, last to leave, Sarah addressed the apoplectic mute.

“See you at work tomorrow, commissioner...”

“What? Oh you’ve gotta be shitting me...”

Mike fumbled for his camera and took a few snapshots before he was dragged out of the room.

“What the hell are you doing, man? He’s not going to forget that...”

“Well, I think I’m already in a lot of shit... maybe those pictures can help keep me out of the worst of it?”

“Jesus... blackmailing the police commissioner... good thing I saw nothin, eh?”

*

Leaving the establishment had proven to be much simpler than entering it. Exits were spaced evenly along the halls, fast bolt holes in case of trouble, that only opened outwards. With the officers distracted by the continued gunfire out front, it had been an easy thing for Mike and the others to slip out, creep out of the alleyway out back, and slam into Lafferty’s car. With a screech of tires, they’d driven off into the night.

“I’m sorry you didn’t find your friends, Mike...”

“It’s okay, Sarah... you know... I think they might be alright... they’re laying low, that’s my guess... I mean you saw that place... they’d been seen there really recently... something went down... maybe they... they mighta had something to do with it. I don’t know... but the Mistress there, she was the one leaning on them... she was the one had something on them... and she’s the one that’s dead. Kinda solves the problem, if they’re alive anyway.”

“Yeah, well... maybe they’ll turn up. With all the sirens and shooting tonight, someone is going to be looking pretty hard at the whole place... no way they can try and cover it up now... fire alarms, shooting... bet the news are all over it, already, too.”

“Hey, Lafferty... where are we heading?”

“You’ll love it Mike... gotta lay low, like we promised... so Sloan and I, we picked someplace real nice for ya. You too Sarah... making fun of the boss like that, he’s gonna remember... think we’ll give him some time to cool down. And this way, you can make sure Mikey here stays under thumb.”

“You’re kidding, right guys? I’ve got to watch him?”

“Listen, we can’t leave him alone, and two guys staying together in a hotel, kinda draws a bit of attention...”

“And you did shoot that guy in the head... Desert Eagle, they might trace it back to you...”

“God damnit. Fine. Sloan, you get to look after my cat while I’m gone... no way I’d let Lafferty near the damn thing. And no trying on my clothes while I’m away...”

“Oh, we won’t...”

*

Lafferty pulled up out front of Mike's old hotel, and killed the engine.

"What's up, guys? Am I getting my stuff and then we go?"

"Oh no... this is it, Mikey. Home sweet home... three weeks, then we'll get you out of here..."

"Three weeks, are you kidding me? They know me here, already. The guy on the front desk has left nasty notes... I can't go back to my room..."

"Your room? Hah. You're not going back there... we've got the perfect place for you to hide out... the honeymoon suite!"

"Oh no..."

"Oh yes. Lafferty's idea. Who doesn't want to be disturbed? Honeymooners. Who has money to burn on room service every night? Honeymooners. Our treat, have fun, lovebirds... make sure you bang on the walls a bit, make them think you're enjoying the view..."

"You're shitting me."

“Nope. Mr and Mrs Wood, honeymooners. All expenses paid by the Original Sin... we’ll just swipe a few bottles of “pee” from the lockup to cover it. Don’t leave the room, don’t call anyone, don’t answer the door to anyone but room service. If your friends turn up, we’ll let you know, otherwise, we’ll let you know. See, couldn’t be simpler. Okay, time to go...”

“Thanks guys... I don’t know what to say...”

“Well... it was worth it, just to see Sarah fire off a round or two...”

“Hey!”

“Not you, nerd... Sarah... she’s such a beauty, the way she blasted that door off its hinges...”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, let’s go before he has to change his pants...”

*

Three weeks. Stuck in a hotel room... honeymoon suite. Best room in the house, best view even with the curtains closed. Unlimited minibar, and nothing else to pass away the time. The guys will turn up... they’re not going to stay underground forever... and then, we’ll fly outta here together. May as well enjoy the honeymoon in the meantime...hey, viva la revolution!

I love making things go kablooeey!

Well, the rescue went almost according to plan. We busted in, made a lot of noise, tore the place apart. And found out my friends were gone, probably not long gone at that. There were some deaths involved, a bit of shooting. Nothing worth elaborating on in what could prove to be evidence used against me in a court of law. I'm in hiding, now. I'm not going to be able to show my face anywhere around here for a while, just in case someone decides they want to shove it in. It's just like being back home, already, except there's no McDonalds.

Epilogue.

It had taken Jonathon and Erik several days to make their way into Quito. After their jeep ran out of fuel, they had found themselves in recently clear-cut forest land. After walking for several miles, following a trail left by the heavy equipment, they had stumbled into a local village. Jonathon found he could almost understand the native Quechua the villagers spoke, although he had difficulty speaking it in return. Eventually, he managed to convince one of the villagers to take them on to a much larger village nearby. Traveling down a dirt path on old but well maintained push-bikes, their guide had led them to a small trading community in a nearby valley. Once there, he and Jonathon had managed to organize for a local trader to take them with him to Quito on his next trip.

They had stayed the night, grateful for a bed to sleep on, before setting out early the next day. Riding out of the valley in the back of the pickup, they caught sight of a caldera, and for the first time, were elevated enough to truly understand just how large the jungle they had been lost in really was. The journey took several hours, and they passed the time sharing pieces of charqui given to them by their driver, and discussing what they should do when they finally arrived in Quito. Between them, they decided that their first place to check with would be the embassy, and then they would try the police stations and hospitals in the area.

During the ride, Jonathon discovered that Erik still carried the severed arm from the crash. Realizing that it had decayed too much to be useful to anyone, they had carefully buried it in the soft earth by the road during a rest break,

marking the place with a small stone cairn in case they ever needed to return. Erik had removed the ring and the watch, still hoping that they would give some clue as to their owner. It was late afternoon when they finally arrived in Quito, and Jonathon thanked their driver for the ride in broken Quechua. They had asked around about the embassy, only to discover that there wasn't in fact any embassy to be found. Downhearted, the two men had made their way to the local police station, in the hopes that there had been some word from their friends.

*

Will had been surviving in the jungle for several days, traveling north. He was not sure, but he thought he was heading towards Quito. On the fourth day, he finally crossed onto a dirt path that looked well used and had followed it towards a small town. He didn't speak a word of the native tongue, and no one spoke English that he met, so he was unable to explain his disheveled and blood-stained state to the people he encountered. Finally, unable to express his situation to the people in the town, he had headed further up the path, hoping to find a larger town. He was surprised when a half hour later he was picked up by a police car, until he considered the effect that a half naked, blood-stained foreigner would have on the local people. One of the officers spoke English, and despite expressing his concerns that Will was in fact a nudist serial killer, they had given him a warm blanket and taken him in to Quito police station.

Several hours of slow questioning had gone by before the officers were convinced he posed little threat. He'd told the officers of how he had survived a

plane crash out in the jungle, and told how he had spent several days walking before he was found. There were many questions about the deep scars along Will's neck and back, but he explained he had been injured in the crash, and that over time the wounds had closed over. Traveling without his passport, or indeed decent clothes or footwear had helped his credibility, along with the fact that his plane had indeed been reported missing. He was told that all people aboard had been presumed killed, and that the search for the wreckage had been called off. The plane was believed to have diverted over an area that was politically unstable, and it was suspected that it had been shot down by militants. Although upset at the news, Will had agreed to lead the officers back to roughly where he had fallen, in the hopes it would help recover the bodies of his friends.

*

Mike had been as good as his word, and had not left the hotel room he had been placed in. Although he had been told to lie low, he was very unsure of the final outcome of his actions. He knew that he had been involved in what amounted to an illegal raid of a militant headquarters, just as he knew that only a few people would accept his side of events. Despite arriving in Quito several weeks ago, he had still found little proof that his friends may have indeed survived the crash as well. Now, having aided in the overthrow of a local dictator, Mike had been left in hiding until the situation had cooled down enough for him to leave the country.

Impatient with waiting for news of his friends, Mike had snuck into the hotel foyer and sent emails to them, in case they had arrived already, and were unable to locate him. Paranoid he had been seen in public, and very aware of the real danger he was still in, he had returned to hiding in his room. He was hoping to hear something from his friends that local authorities hadn't yet discovered, or at least hadn't yet relayed to him.

*

Their reunion had been bittersweet. Jonathon and Erik had found Will in the local police station, and while overjoyed that he had survived as well, they were devastated with the news that there had been no other survivors. The officers had asked them questions to corroborate Will's story, and for the first time they learnt some of the horrific details of Will's own travels. They also saw the vicious scarring Will had received from the crash. By describing their own travels, they managed to give a much narrower area for the officers to search; they were told that they were no longer needed to accompany the teams personally. Believing Mike to be among the dead, the three had gone to their original booked hotel rooms, making preparations to leave and contacting their families. No one could bring themselves to contact Mike's family, and they decided they would wait for confirmation before giving them the bad news.

It was only by chance that Erik had decided to check his email, hoping to get confirmation of their tickets from the airline, he had seen an anonymous email sitting in his junk box. Opening it, he read Mike's terse communication.

Hey guys,

Where are you?

I'm not sure if any of you are alive, but I am. Just so you know. I'm hiding out in the JW Marriott Hotel, honeymoon suite. If you're out there, that's where I'll be.

Oh yeah, assholes...lets try being in a plane that lands next time, rather than one that blows up. Sounds like a great idea, right?

M. Dawg.

P.S. Don't be followed.

*

Will, Jonathon and Erik had spent little time finding their way to Mike's room. Instead of his normal acerbic self, they had found him visibly shaken and obviously quite paranoid. When they had asked him what had happened, he had refused to comment, only asking that they continue to let him lie low for a few days, and tell no one they had seen him. Finally, with much coaxing, they had managed to convince Mike that he would be safer if he stayed with them, and if they reported he had been found to the police so they would stop searching. Hesitant at first, but unable to explain why to his friends, Mike had eventually

found himself with little choice, and he had stood by nervously while they had made the call to the officers looking into their situation.

*

Several more days passed before emergency passports could be arranged for everyone, but finally their travel arrangements were set, and the four boarded a plane heading out from Quito to Mexico City. Waiting for the time to pass was difficult, as the four found they couldn't quite bring themselves to relate their stories in full. Erik told the others about finding the body of the soldier who had probably shot their plane down, but didn't give details on how he had found it. Jonathon tried to explain how he had picked up some of the native language, and how he had survived with a small group of people before finding Will. Mike remained completely shut off and refused to discuss what had happened, saying only that he had arrived in Quito well ahead of them, and had been unable to find them. Will's story was the most unbelievable for the others, as he explained how he had befriended a widow and her daughter in a small village, and how he hoped to return as soon as he had his affairs in order. He said little about their relationship, only telling them she had saved him after the crash.

*

As they were checking their few remaining belongings on board that Erik realized he still had the watch and ring from the pilot. On the verge of canceling his ticket, Will had instead suggested that they return the watch and ring to the

themselves, seeing as they were flying back that way anyway. The others were hesitant, until Will offered to return the items on his own. He explained he felt he owed the pilot gratitude for bringing their plane down as safely as he had, and that it was something he wanted to do. Erik handed the items over, and Will had carefully put the watch in with his luggage. No one noticed as he slipped the wedding ring onto his finger, resting it in its groove.

Jonathon's Diary, Epilogue.

November 17th

I haven't felt like writing in this thing, so don't fucking start with me. Well, until now. We got the band back together! We found everyone! See that, world? I don't suck at everything! Yeah. Do a little dance. Doo do doooo, doo do doooo. Anyway, we'd sorta been passed from village to village out here, relying on the kindness of strangers. Charqui rocks, btw, as long as you don't smell it or look too closely at the red bits. We eventually made it to Quito... so we went to the police station, and fucked if Will wasn't there, having a cuppa. Then he let me have a coffee too, and I felt a lot better. Guess Erik wins, and it wasn't Will's arm. (Of course, he brought it along so far, if we'd held it another day, we coulda just pointed it at him and asked... sick bastard.) Anyway, they held us for a bit, asked us a lot of questions. Seems Will was in a bit of a state when he arrived, but he doesn't want to talk, and I for one respect that. That and his stories are boring anyway. Accounting boring. So we were in our hotel, trying to sort out what'd happen next, ringing home and stuff, and then wham, email from Mike. Turns out he's been in hiding out in a hotel for a week or so. He's a bit weird, yeah? So now we're flying out... we kept Mike out of sight for a few, although I don't think feeding his paranoia is the brightest thing we've ever done. Did keep him quiet at least. So the trip was a bust, and our pilot's body still hasn't been found, (we owe him big time if you ask me, no one else seems too fussed either way, except Will), and now we're heading home. And my damn hip is scar-tissue white. Guess I'll have to enjoy the flight home to make up for it. Okay, packing again, mostly

souvenirs now, seeing as all OUR stuff got lost. In you go, diary. That's right.

Right back next to the underwear.

Erik's Diary, Epilogue.

Day 10.

Okay, I really don't think it is actually day 10 of the trip, but there wasn't much to write about. And I still can't really talk about what happened with anyone. We made it to Quito, and eventually we found Will and Mike. I am so relieved everyone is alive. We're leaving this place, and I have to say, I for one have had enough traveling for the foreseeable future. We're going to try to find the pilot's family, Will has something to give to his widow, but first we're going home. Here's hoping we have a safer flight home.

Will's Diary, Epilogue.

Travel diary, entry 10.

I've found them. Well, no, they've found me. Jonathon and Erik came stumbling into Quito a day or so after I got here. I didn't exactly make a stellar entrance, and cut up and bleeding, the police decided to take me into custody. Anyway, after the two guys arrived, the police lightened up quite a bit, and then they let us all go. I've told the police I think I can lead them back to where we crashed. Well, where I crashed anyway, and maybe from there, they can find the rest of the wreckage. We're in a hotel room now, taking a breather, and then we're going to try and find out what happened to Mike. He left us an email, so he's here in Quito too, but he's scared of something. We're heading over there this afternoon, I think, to see what is going on, then getting ready to fly out. I am a little reluctant to leave now. But I've made a promise I have to keep, so one day soon I'll be coming back. I found what I was looking for.

Mike's Diary, Epilogue.

I've got a new epitaph, right here, "Have you paid your dues, Jack? Yessir, the check is in the mail."

I've been hiding in a hotel in Quito for a few weeks now. No one had heard shit from Erik, Will and Jonathon. Maybe because they've apparently been fuckassing around in the wild. I snuck out, sent them each an email. I was really polite, I thought, and quite understanding of being left alone to die in the jungle. Anyway, I've heard back, and they're on their way to me. I'm glad, because if I have to sit in this room alone another day, I swear I'm going to stop finding myself funny. Can't wait til we get the hell out of here, although it's bittersweet... c'est la vie.